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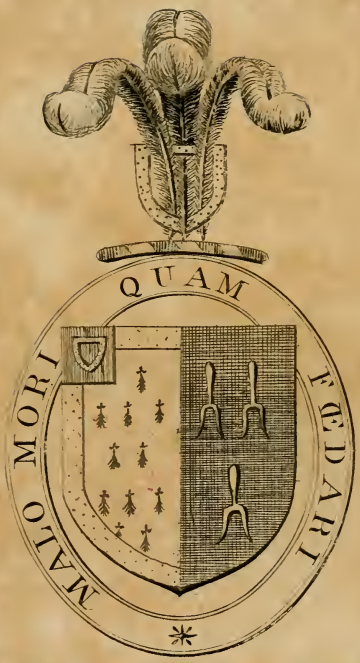

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Under which Lord?

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'Only the neighbour and the gentleman is recognised in this house.'

Under which Lord?

BY

E. LYNN LINTON

AUTHOR OF 'THE WORLD WELL LOST' 'PATRICIA KEMBALL' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

WITH TWELVE ILLUSTRATIONS BY ARTHUR HOPKINS

London

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1879

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'Because we have found not yet
Any way for the world to follow
Save only that ancient way;
Whosoever forsake or forget,
Whose faith soever be hollow,
Whose hope soever grow grey

Monotones : Songs before Sunrise

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INSCRIBED TO

A. W. B.

WITH GRATITUDE FOR HIS KINDNESS

AND

ADMIRATION FOR HIS LEARNING

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FIRST VOLUME.

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UNDER WHICH LORD?

CHAPTER I.

CROSSHOLME ABBEY.

CONTRARY to all expectation and the father's prophecy, the marriage had turned out a success. It had looked doubtful enough when it was made, having in it almost all the elements which lead from hope to disappointment and bring bitter fruits after fragrant flowers. Unsuitability of worldly position; that intensity of youthful passion which is so sure to cool down into a maturity of prosaic indifference; parental disapprobation, even when all active opposition was withdrawn—and parental disapprobation always carries a curse with it—yes, it was certain to turn out ill, said the world, adding up the crooked sum diligently and seeing only sorrow as the result, as it has so often seen the like before.

And if nothing else were amiss, they were too young

to know their own minds. Indeed this might be taken as the foundation of the whole sorry super-structure. A romantic girl of seventeen and an easy-going young officer of just twenty-one can hardly be expected to understand what is needed for solid happiness or the best development of their own natures; and, married at that age, the chances were that they would grow apart as they grew older, and that when they came to be real man and woman they would find themselves thinking differently on every subject under heaven. And without mental sympathy, where is the true joy of home?

Why the chances were greater that they should grow apart rather than together, and come to mental discord rather than to harmony, the prophets of evil did not explain. They only said that it was so, and that the thing was certain; and assertion to some people is as conclusive as proof.

Then, the money was on the wrong side.

Richard Spence, though emphatically a gentleman, had only his pay as a lieutenant in the army, while Hermione Fullerton was an heiress entitled to look among the aristocracy for her husband, had she been wise enough to wait and make use of her gifts. Young, exceptionally beautiful, amiable, wealthy—there was no

state nor place below a throne to which, in her father's estimation of chances, she might not have reasonably aspired. Had she cared to marry a Roman prince she might have chosen among the proudest; had she been content with an English earl, she might have found one to her mind and many to her hand. Instead of either she fixed her affections on a mere nobody—a handsome, clever, well-conducted, good-tempered nobody if you like—but no more what she had the right to expect than if he had been the blacksmith or the shoemaker. So said her father in his wrath; and his friends echoed his displeasure.

Being however a weak-willed man if an angry, and having always indulged her every wish, Mr. Fullerton suffered the girl to take her own way; and before she had reached her eighteenth birthday the great heiress of Crossholme Abbey was married to her penniless subaltern of nowhere, to the indignation of her other suitors and the general dissatisfaction of the county.

Mr. Fullerton did what he could to neutralize the commercial disadvantages of the match by making things safe for his daughter and unpleasant for the man of her choice. Every farthing of her own fortune, inherited from her mother, was settled on herself: and though

Richard had given up his profession, with its Indian appointment and contingent possibilities, at her instance, and therefore might have reasonably expected a certain provision without being considered a fortune-hunter, yet he had not even a life-interest in any part of the property; and if his wife died before him all went to her children; or, failing these, to her next of kin. It was submission to these terms, said Mr. Fullerton grimly, or no wife. He might choose which he would, but he had to choose one or the other.

As the young fellow was sincerely in love, money or no money, and felt that his life with all its grand inheritance of thought and feeling would be in vain if Hermione did not share it, he submitted—hard as the terms were; and gave up his profession and independence as the sacrifice that he too made for love's sake. He was not afraid that Hermione, loving and generous as she was, would ever make him regret his trust by the humiliation which it would be in her power to inflict. He knew that he was throwing himself as a dependent on her bounty, if she liked to make it so; but he was magnanimous enough to rely on the magnanimity of another, and, faithful for his own part, he believed in faithfulness as probable from most—from Hermione as certain.

Fortunately for the young people, Mr. Fullerton died about four years after their marriage. While he lived he made life hard enough for the young fellow whose union with his daughter he never forgave, and whose sonship he never acknowledged; and it took all Richard's sweetness of temper and practical philosophy to bear with patience the petty insults and galling annoyances to which he was daily subject at the Abbey. But all things come to an end, and the elder man died just as Hermione came of age; and even she felt, through all her natural sorrow, that the one sole danger to her happiness had been removed.

The first clause in his will provided that the young people should take his own name, and be thenceforth Fullerton. He would not recognize the husband even so far as to allow his name the penultimate place. The others made Hermione his heiress, with the same provision for her children or next of kin as in the marriage settlements; all benefit being denied to Richard, save such as came to him through the fact of his marriage and consequent sharing in his wife's possessions.

It was the hardest legal instrument that could be devised, and was like a blow in the young man's face from the dead. But it had just the contrary effect to

that intended. Still so young—the love between them as fresh and fragrant as when they stood in the garden together on that memorable day, and Hermione, like Corisande, gave Richard a rose—the birth of their little daughter Virginia having been but an additional bond of union, and the death of the boy who came after drawing them as close by sorrow as this by joy—Hermione felt less the grateful daughter than the outraged wife; less the proud possessor than the reluctant heiress; and vowed amidst tears and caresses that nothing should ever make her act on the provisions of a will so unjust as this, or accept the undeserved place of superior assigned to her. Richard was her lord, as all husbands should be to loving wives; and what she was in name he should be in fact.

She placed everything unreservedly in his hands, and kept nothing for herself. Her first act of mistresshood was to give her husband a power of attorney to deal with all as he would. This was the utmost that she could do, according to the will; but both felt that, poor weak instrument as it was and revocable at pleasure, it was as firm and sure as if it had been an Act of Parliament duly signed by the sovereign. From cheques to leases all was in his hands, and she would not even learn what

he did with the land and its revenues, nor how he exercised the manorial rights and privileges standing in her name. She was a woman without much reasoning faculty and with no sense of property; but with an overwhelming power of obedience and self-abnegation which made her the docile creature of the man whom she loved. And this sacrifice of her fortune, this transfer of her rights to the husband from whom they had been so jealously guarded, pleased her more than power would have done.

Her reward lay in his love. Passion, romance, and mental exaltation were her life; and in relation to the saying that human nature cannot live at high pressure, and that passion wears down into sober sense by use, she was the exception that proves the rule. She could have lived for ever at high pressure; and her romance would never have worn itself out by use, if only it might be fed by the daily renewal of vows and caresses—the daily repetition of the sweet follies of the courting-time. What she dreaded most was the prosaic dulness of the commonplace—what she most esteemed, perpetual mental excitement. If her husband would be always her lover living only for her, and if her marriage might remain an unending courtship, she would ask no more of God or

man. But she was not one with whom duty would ever take the place of emotion, or the quiet security of home stand her in stead of the unrest of romance.

If this was a weakness, it was an amiable one; and for the first four or five years Richard met her more than half-way, and made her life, as she used to say, like one long poem. But as time went on and his love consolidated by very habit, he became, after the manner of Englishmen in general, less assiduous than content; less the lover than the friend; no longer suing for something not bestowed, but holding in such inalienable security that neither doubt was possible nor prayer needed. Besides, after Mr. Fullerton's death and his appointment as his wife's irresponsible agent, he had other things to do than sitting at her feet, or she at his, while he read aloud the last new novel or the latest poem—her cheek against his knee and his hand among her golden curls. Truth to say, like all men who have anything in them, this Armida's garden which in the beginning he had found so satisfactory, so seductive, had somewhat palled on him. He wanted something beside the love without which, however, he could scarce have lived at all.

He loved his wife—no man better; no man with more faithfulness, more trust, more devotion; and

just in proportion to the depth, the reality of his affection, seemed to him the value of quiet acceptance and the uselessness of incessant demonstration. The thing was a fact; and facts when once established have to be taken for granted. What was the good of always repeating what was so well understood? The time for love-making had passed, and that for loving in deep and tranquil trust had come.

The time too had come for graver duties and deeper studies. He must take his place among men; exercise such moral influence as his mental powers entitled him to exercise; make up his mind on certain speculative matters which had begun to trouble him and to importune for a settlement; and when his mind should be made up, then his action would be clear. It was the natural development of youth into manhood; and he would not have been the fine fellow he was had he not gone through the process. Love is the first heaven of the young man; but then comes his life as a citizen among citizens;—passion preceding thought, unrest giving place to calmness, and pleasure lost in work and found in knowledge.

But to a certain class of women this gradual development is never accepted with philosophy. They would

keep their men always boys and never let the lover pass into the friend; and they resent the law of nature which crystallizes that which was once fluid and transforms into quiet certainty the love which was once so delicious in its unrest. Hermione was one of these women; and though she was too devoted to complain—having indeed nothing tangible of which to complain—she felt the nameless difference that crept by degrees into her life, and suffered as much as she had once been blessed. Where her husband, suspecting no dissatisfaction and conscious of no want, lived in supreme content and happiness, tranquil, secure, but a little abstracted, a little pre-occupied, she began to silently eat out her heart, and to recognize that her life had a void of which she knew neither the name nor the remedy.

Her husband? No woman could have one more tender in all essentials, more devoted, more faithful. If he spent long hours away from her, he had, as he said, his local duties to attend to which must be fulfilled. And she could scarcely grudge him the dry studies to which he had devoted himself, and for which she had no aptitude, though he found them more enthralling than art or poetry or love. Biological science and ecclesiastical history?—she cared neither for cells nor pro-

toplasm; neither for the crack-brained subtleties of sectarian doctrines nor for the horrors of the Papal rule; nor yet for philological accuracy, and whether all the words in the Bible were rightly rendered or no;—in all of which matters Richard had cast his line, hoping to fish up Truth as his reward. No, she could not share his studies; but she had not therefore the right to interfere with them; and though she silently resented the time given to them as time stolen from her, she was wise enough to keep silence, and not to let him know that she was jealous of his microscope and wished that all his books on science were burnt in the fire.

On his side indeed he might argue that she had her child, who was naturally to her what his studies were to him—her little Virginia growing up in docility and sweetness unsurpassable, and lovely enough to justify even a mother's idealizing admiration. She felt all this, if she did not put it into so many words; and she used to ask herself—with health, fortune, a faultless husband, a sweet and interesting child, and the faculty of loving and rejoicing as fresh as when she was herself a child—how could she have a void? What was it? Why did she feel so lonely, so bereft as she did?—for in what blessing did she fail?

She could not tell. Nevertheless, there it was; a fact as true as the rest. She used to sigh when she read those tender bits of poetry, sang those yearning songs which once expressed her own condition, but which now seemed pictures of a land that she had lost, of a home whence she was shut out. Tears were often in her eyes as she looked at the golden sunset, or watched the changing clouds, or wondered at the mystery of the stars. She did not know what ailed her; but there was so often that aching at her heart, as if her life were empty of some sweetness that it ought to have! The quiet security of her very happiness oppressed her with a sense of dumbness and sleep. It was all so monotonous and commonplace—all so unexciting! Days passed one after the other, and all exactly alike. Had she been poor she would have been forced to exert herself; forced to think and contrive and do; as it was, there was no need for any exertion whatsoever; and the neighbourhood afforded no pleasures of such brilliancy as to make them distracting and enlivening. Everything in her life was sleek and quiet and sleepy. The hours were fixed, their habits punctual. Richard gave all the morning, much of the afternoon, and often the best part of the evening, to his studies and pursuits; and when

he wanted to amuse her told her some facts in natural history or the more recondite positive sciences, of which, not having the context, she did not understand the bearing and wondered at the importance which he assigned to them.

If it were for things like those that he neglected her, she used to think, she wondered at his taste, and thought him both blind and cold. He was neither, as she knew; but it pleased her to believe him both, that she might have cause for the small thin thread of bitterness which was beginning to weave itself into the golden garment of her love. And when she looked into the glass and studied what she saw, that thin thread grew broader; for she knew that, thirty-eight as she now was, she was as beautiful as when she was first married, even if the fashion of her beauty had changed, as needs must, with the passage of time. Still, if she were always lovely, Richard was no longer her lover; and of what use her charms if he had failed to see them?

Sometimes she thought this secret pining of hers came from an unregenerate heart and the want of vital religion. True, she went to church; but for form's sake and because it was expected of her as the duty owing to her position and to Virginia—not for spiritual need and

less for spiritual comfort. She supposed that some things which she heard there were true; but she did not realize them, and she more than half doubted the rest. In the state in which she was, religion was rather an irritation than a support, and the Bible perplexed instead of strengthening her. She did not know what in it was true, nor feel what in it was elevating. If there were such a thing as the Divine Life, the present vicar of Crossholme, sleepy, indolent, "unawakened" old Mr. Aston, could not lead her to its knowledge; and at home she was even farther from help or guidance. Her husband's studies had led him into the opposite camp, and he had become a pronounced free-thinker—agnostic he called himself; infidel he was called by others. He had placed science in the seat of theology, and his life's endeavour now was to weaken the hold of the Christian faith on the minds of men:—not by reviling the creed and its professors, but by showing the contradictions which exist between nature and revelation, Genesis and science, by substituting knowledge for superstition, reason for faith, and history for mythology.

Not to give umbrage to any one, and especially not to Mr. Aston, whose age demanded consideration if his character was unheroic, by using for his secular lectures,

with their heterodox tendencies, the schoolroom where missionary meetings and the like were held, Richard had built just outside the gates of the Abbey park a working-man's reading-room, which he had stocked with a good library, of anti-religious character, and where he himself gave lectures and held classes, chiefly scientific and historical—whence he trusted that his audience would draw conclusions favourable to free-thought and hostile to the domination of the Church. His opposition was always good-tempered and impersonal, even when most unmistakable; always courteous and founded on elemental principles, not on the practice of professors; the opposition of a gentleman and a fair opponent; but it was as strong as if it had been brutal, and all the more telling because it was so calmly reasoned.

As his studies grew in extent and deepened in character, he became more and more confessedly a free-thinker; more and more convinced, he used to say, that modern Christianity is a string of errors founded on part falsehood, part misapprehension;—the Bible history a conglomerate of myths;—the influence of the Church the consolidation of intellectual darkness;—that belief without proof is folly, and faith as opposed to reason the superstition of savages and children;—that the highest

duty of man is that which he owes to the community—his bravest act of spiritual manliness the confession of his spiritual ignorance. Mr. Aston, too old and self-indulgent to trouble himself for other men's souls, indifferent to all that was done in the parish provided he was left undisturbed, and liking both Hermione and her handsome husband, infidel as he was—more the pity!—too much to quarrel with him, received these shafts of modern thought on the broad shield of established position. Here was the church and here it would remain. Christianity had been argued out to the dregs, and proved divine by all the tests that could be applied; and what Tillotson and Blair and Chillingworth and Newton had believed he was not ashamed to accept. He had not seen yesterday's sun; and if any madman chose to say that it was not there because he had not seen it, why let him. What did it signify? and who was the worse for a fool's folly?

This was his stock of arguments; and of what vital good were such to a soul seeking for light in the darkness or wishing to be convinced of salvation in the midst of doubts on immortality?

So stood matters at Crossholme Abbey when Virginia had passed her nineteenth birthday by just two months;

at which date this story opens. Her father—happy, busy, contented with his lot all round, giving his main strength to educating certain men, young and old, into such knowledge of science as should lead them to the rejection of both Christian dogma and clerical influence; loving and affectionate to his own family, but not living much with them and still less in society—was a grand and glorious figure in this life, truly; but he was not her companion; and at her age, with her nature, she wanted religion, not philosophy; faith, not scepticism; adoration of God and the angels, not critical examination of verbal forms and isolated facts in natural history.

Her mother, outwardly happy because calm and uncomplaining—of what had she to complain?—inwardly withdrawing herself more and more from her husband, and secretly disposed to find things with him wrong which once were right—neither religious nor irreligious—feeling that it would be better if she could believe more faithfully and live more earnestly than she did, but as she could not—why, she could not!—always conscious of that dull aching void and suffering from her nameless yearning, but unable to kill the one or satisfy the other—was even less a guide, less a companion than her father might have been;—and she herself, pale, sweet Virginia

beginning to ask herself restlessly the meaning of life—beginning to realize that it ought to contain more than the mere routine duties of a pleasant, peaceful, objectless home.

Pale, pure Virginia! the most like a human lily to be seen anywhere!—the most of a saint out of canonization! No sweet sad legend of maiden courage could show a more perfect ideal of the virgin-martyr than she was; no child's dream of an angel could have found a truer impersonation. Tall, with abundant hair—not golden like her mother's nor chestnut like her father's, but of the true flaxen hue, and like heavy hanks of spun silk; with blue eyes, large and mournful, but light where her mother's were as deep as sapphires and her father's were dark grey; all her lines long and slender; her manners full of unconscious grace and of unconscious modesty; indifferent to physical pleasures and averse from social gaiety; devoted rather than expansive; thoughtful rather than observant; conscientious, truthful, ever eager to confess a fault, but more silent than communicative and seldom speaking of herself or her feelings—she was a natural nun; and had she been a Roman Catholic her vocation would have been assured.

As it was, what was her place? what her rightful func-

tions? She had no more of the romance of love in her nature than she had of care for dress or pleasure in dainty food; so that marriage did not seem her fitting lot in the future, though it might be almost necessary because of her wealth and position. Indeed, the idea of marriage when associated with her, seemed sacrilege rather than the fulfilment of a natural destiny; and a commonplace courtship would be an impossibility. Her mother used to think that her own life would have been brighter had her daughter been different. It would have been so interesting to watch the dawn and progress of a pleasant love affair between her and some charming youth—such as Richard was before he had taken to mythology and protoplasm, and when he was still a lover, ardent, poetic, and uncertain of her full response. Assisting at her child's young dreams would have renewed her own; but alas! there were none at which to assist. This fair young saint moved through the quiet shadows of her life as if she had been a second Una or the modern high-priestess of the Vestals. When the men who had fallen in love with her sincerely and for her own sake—like Ringrove Hardisty, for instance—looked unhappy, and pleaded only dumbly with their eyes, she was sorry to see them sad. But when they

said they loved her and asked for her love in return, then she shuddered and took refuge with her mother, as a child frightened by some strange monster. When her father, true to his belief in liberty, laid before her the offers for her hand which came to him, and the "requests for permission to address" her—with a grave smile if the thing were socially or personally absurd, with tears in her eyes if it were possible, she begged him to refuse; and, laying her hand on his shoulder, would say tenderly: "I want to love no one but you and mamma. If only I could *do* something for you!—if I could work or sacrifice something to show my love!"

No one had as yet stirred her heart or warmed her imagination in the smallest degree; not even Ringrove Hardisty, who was of a kind that need not have sought far for a response, and who was backed in his hopes by her father's wishes and her mother's desires. But the life for which Virginia longed—that unknown, undesignated life of spiritual exaltation, of the realization of God—was the farthest possible removed from human love or physical enjoyment; and neither Ringrove Hardisty nor any other man had touched her with that fire which consumes and withers as much as it vivifies and beautifies.

This was Virginia Fullerton at the age of nineteen; and such as she was, she was the true product of her parents, though so unlike each. Her mother's need of romantic emotion and personal excitement was mated with her father's passionate love of truth for its own sake; and both together gave her the possibilities of that exalted and unselfish devotedness which once made martyrs and still makes zealots. If she had only known how and where, she would gladly have given herself to the service of humanity, or have dedicated her life to the perpetual worship of God in Truth. But, rudderless as her mother was, with no insight for her own part and no message for others—mentally isolated and content with the denial of dogma and the assertion of material fact as was her father, finding in intellect all that she sought in spirituality, in science what she yearned for from God—to whom could she turn for help? what could she believe? how learn what was true and divine in this world of ours, and what false and human only? And, above all, what could she do to utilize her powers for the good of others?

Yet surely some nobler kind of existence was to be found than in this smooth, calm, self-indulgent life of a home like theirs, where their very charities cost them

nothing—not even the self-sacrifice of a little trouble—and where their main duty was to be happy and to enjoy. And again, surely there was something spiritually greater than this dry knowledge of a few scientific facts—this sweeping denial of all that could not be touched and seen! So many men and women had not lived and died for a mere dream, nor yet for an impossible lie. The religious life must have something in it, if only she knew what it was! Girl as she was, day by day she became more sorrowfully if still only dimly conscious that this was not her fitting sphere; and that lying for her elsewhere were work and peace of a far different kind from these lady-like occupations of no earthly good when done—from this sleek happiness through the mere absence of disturbing sorrows—such as made up the life of home. But what? and where?

Once, when she was reading *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, which her father had given her to show to what mad excesses superstitious fancy can lead mankind, she laid down the book with a sigh.

"If only all this were true, mamma!" she said, raising her eyes that were as full of unanswered yearning as was that mother's heart.

"Yes," said Hermione, echoing her sigh; "but you

see it is not, my dear; and your father says the whole thing was hysteria where not falsehood or imposture."

"I think there was something in it beside disease; and these were not the people to deceive or impose," returned Virginia.

"It is possible—who knows?" answered her mother vaguely; and the conversation dropped, as all their conversation always dropped, because the one had nothing to teach and the other had all to learn.

But the wish to know and share the mystical passion and rapt enthusiasm of the old-time saints remained; and the longing to find the real meaning of life and to fulfil some high duty toward God or man deepened and grew with Virginia till it became an ever-present pain, and the uselessness of her days an ever-sharp reproach.

CHAPTER II.

MEASURING THE GROUND.

GREAT events were not frequent at Crossholme. At Starton, the county town some five miles away, more was stirring; and feuds and love-makings, deaths, marriages, and new things generally were of constant occurrence. Here at quiet Crossholme the great flood rolled more sluggishly, and history had but little to record. The death then of the old vicar, which happened rather suddenly at this time, was a matter of supreme importance; and who was to be his successor, and what he would be like, filled men's minds with speculations as grave as if the question had been, to the Romish Church, the consecration of an immortal pope—to the United States, the election of a life-long president.

It was a question of supreme importance even to Richard Fullerton; though standing for his own part so far beyond the outermost pale of the communion as to have neither sympathy of thought nor personal interest in anything within. All the same, the matter

touched him nearly; more nearly indeed than many others whose minds had never wandered an inch beyond the fold. So far as things had gone hitherto he had been unmolested in his doings, and had not come into direct collision with any one. True, he was called an infidel, and people pitied his poor wife for the certainty of eternal separation that she must foresee, when she, it was to be hoped, would go to heaven and he would be inexorably consigned to the clutches of the Evil One; and his lectures were considered a "pity" and nonsensical—for what did village carpenters and wheelwrights want with chemistry and astronomy, physiology and history? It was only filling their minds with things quite out of their sphere; making them conceited with a little knowledge, and doing no good anyhow.

But if the vicar and the resident gentry had not upheld, neither had they opposed; and Mr. Fullerton's reprehensible craze had been given fair play and its full swing.

Would the new vicar be as tolerant, and content himself with now a Shakesperean quotation, and now a Biblical, expressive of his contempt for the rabble and the inutility of casting pearls before swine? If he chose he could make things unpleasant enough for the icono-

clast of the Abbey—as unpleasant, in another way, as his father-in-law had done. He could embarrass his relations with his men—as he called his little band of regular hearers—and either compel him to silence or commit them to social ostracism; supposing that he got the ear of the place and used his power tyrannously. Starton was quite near enough, and communication between it and Crossholme frequent enough, to render this latter independent of local handicraftsmen; and a man of influence could, if he chose, starve out an obnoxious villager living by the goodwill of others. What if the new man did so choose?

These thoughts had come to Richard with painful vividness when he heard of Mr. Aston's sudden death; and now they were renewed, more vividly and more painfully, as he thought of his successor, the Honourable and Reverend Launcelot Lascelles, who had read himself in last Sunday, and on whom he and Hermione had been discussing at breakfast to-day the propriety of a welcoming visit. Knowing the new vicar by repute as one of the most advanced of the ritualistic party, with clear and well-defined views on the power of the priesthood and the submission of the laity, he felt that he must prepare himself for the struggle that was sure to

come. The days of neutrality were over and those of strife were at hand. A man holding the most extreme doctrines as yet formulated—one who, assuming quasi-divine powers as part of his functions, preached confession as absolutely necessary for the health of the soul and priestly absolution as integral to God's forgiveness—who exalted the worship of the Virgin into a religious necessity, and taught the value of invocation to the saints and the pious need of priestly prayers for the souls of the dead—who was a Roman Catholic in all save name and obedience, being his own pope and college of cardinals in one; absolute by right of ordination, and owing no submission to the heads of the Church whereof he was an inferior member, nor to the laws of the country whereof he was a citizen, should either displease him—one who was contemptuous of modern science, sceptical of modern progress, and opposed to all forms of mental freedom—such a man as this at Crossholme, where the unthinking majority was careless and the thoughtful minority unbelieving! Yes, that meant a struggle, and Richard realized the position.

"But my men will not be warped," he thought, as he lifted his head from the microscope through which

he had been looking—thinking rather than seeing;—for indeed the moment was grave. "They know the truth now, and the falsehood of all those fables which no man of sense can believe if once he dares to examine them by the light of reason. No priest will be able to get hold of them, trading as they all do on ignorance of scientific facts, on hysterical emotion, and on sensual impressionability. If he threatens them however with loss of work?—and is able to make his threats good? That is possible, and what I fear more than all. Well, if he does, my income is large enough to bear even a severe drain, and I will help them as much as he hinders. Poor fellows! they shall come to no worldly loss for the sake of the truth, so long as I have sixpence to share among them."

It was characteristic both of his trustful temper and unselfishness, that Richard thought of his men only, not in any way of himself or his own house; characteristic of his circumstances, that he thought of *his* income, *his* power to do such and such things and deal as he thought best with the Abbey lands and revenues. He had been so long accustomed to supreme administration as to forget that in reality all belonged to Hermione, not to him, and that he was only her agent, to

be dismissed at her pleasure and having no real power over what he had held for so long in undisputed possession. To have reminded himself of this would have been either a folly, as one who should make preparations for the end of the world, which yet is a great fact that has to come, and might any day—who knows?—but will not; or it would have been an act of *lèse majesté* against the best, truest, and most loving heart that ever made mortal woman precious to man.

Good, faithful wife! How thoroughly at that moment he realized her steadfastness, her loyalty; and how warmly he recognized his own good fortune in possessing her! His thoughts went back to those first days of his youth; and like a picture the whole thing passed in one rapid moment before his mind. He saw her as she was when they first met at the county ball, the prettiest creature whom he had ever beheld; he remembered how his passion grew and grew, though he never dared to hope for a successful issue, because of her wealth and her father's known ambition. And yet those darkened eyes; that blushing face; that tell-tale sunny smile when they met; and those maddening tears when he told her that he was going, and she turned away sobbing, struggling vainly with her pride, overpowered by her

despair!—and then he remembered how the floodgates of his own love opened; and the girlish joy that took the place of all this sorrow as she smiled up in his face "I love you!" and kissed the rose which she picked to give him as her token. He had that rose yet in his drawer. It was sacred to him, withered and faded as it was. Then all that followed:—her father's opposition and her own steadfastness; the marriage and its hard financial conditions; his life of small humiliations and her sweet cheerful love as his reward; the little one that came to bless and that remained—that other which came only to sorrow, and that left them; and now his calm, useful, busy life; her divine content; Virginia's sweet unsuspectingness of sorrow or of sin. How happy he and they were! There was but one evil that could touch him, and that was Death. But, *absit omen!* That dreamless sleep was far from either, and years on years of love and peace lay before them. They would see their silver and their golden and even their diamond wedding, he thought, smiling to himself; and carry on their tottering knees Virginia's golden-haired grandchild. They were so happy! no one in the world more so! He wanted nothing, absolutely nothing; save perhaps that dear son whom he had so earnestly desired and

so sorely regretted. But Ringrove Hardisty would one day be his son; so he hoped; and he believed as he hoped. The only difference was that the family would be continued in the female line; and that his daughter would inherit the property which had come to him through her mother. Yes; everything was right, and everything would go on as it had been for all these years.

And then he turned to his microscope again, and studied afresh the monad whose "life history" he too was recording as his contribution in a certain controversy raging among scientists with some unphilosophical warmth. Ah, this was something worth living for! The Honourable and Reverend Launcelot Lascelles was forgotten as if he had never existed. His love poem with Hermione faded as if no sweet echo had ever thrilled the fibres of his brain, the chords of his memory. Virginia and the lost son; Ringrove Hardisty and his hopes; his men and their possibilities of trouble—all were merged in the eager closeness with which he marked the changes from a line to a sac, and from a smooth sphere to an irregular figure of no denomination, of a transparent little creature not to be seen at all save under a magnifying power of some hundreds of

diameters. And of what use pray, when seen? the unscientific world asks with a sneer.

And while he was studying and noting, absorbed in his work, the servant came into the room to tell him that the new clergyman, Mr. Lascelles, was in the drawing-room; and his mistress said, would he please to come when convenient?

"Directly, John, directly," he answered, not looking up. "Tell your mistress I will be with her in a moment."

But the moment lengthened out into rather more than an hour before he came; for time flew fast with him and memory stopped still, and it was only when all his observations were made for the day that he remembered his wife's message, and that the new clergyman was waiting for him in the drawing-room. And all this time Mr. Lascelles had been sitting alone with Hermione, whose soul he had been probing and whose weak places he had been finding out with the skill of a man accustomed to read character, to deal with opposition, and to convince ignorance.

He had found out certain things already. One was that she was weary—with that worst of all weariness, idleness; and that she would hail anything that gave

her a new interest and new occupation. Another was that she was impressionable, and, he should judge, weak; affectionate—but is it affection only, or is there not some admixture of vanity as well, which makes a woman amenable to a man's flatteries judiciously offered? And Hermione was amenable to flattery; else why that sudden flush, that bashful quiver of the downcast eyelids, when he, preparing the ground, spoke to her of the help in his great schemes and hopes for the parish which he expected from her, the Lady of the Manor, and of such sweet and noble repute as she was?

As for her husband, Mr. Lascelles ignored him altogether. When Hermione, woman-like, wife-like, put him forward, claiming first his permission before consenting to this plan, that proposal—or, sure that he would never allow her to do this, to commit herself to that—the clergyman set him aside with a kind of lofty high-handedness, as if wifely submission were an old wife's tale unfit for a reasonable woman to hold, and for a Lady of the Manor, a lay rector, unseemly—considering all things. Had those things been the other way, and she the infidel, Richard the believer, perhaps his argu-

ment would have been different. But that was not the present question; and Hermione had not skill enough to see that certain principles are like chameleons which change their colour according to the ground on which they rest.

The first two things which the new vicar had it at heart to do were to parcel the parish out into districts —of which the ladies of the place were to be the visitors—and to organize a small surpliced choir. The first would give him the influence over the women, the second over the boys; and both would necessitate much personal intercourse between him and those of his flock whom it was most essential to win over into personal attachment and moral submission. The more advanced methods would have to wait. They would come in time; but the time was not yet ripe; and, bold as he was, he feared that he might frighten some of the more timid and put the cautious on their guard, were he to unfold the whole of his programme at once. Besides, of what good to say "I intend" or "I wish" when you cannot do? Why call the world to criticize the house of which even the stones are not yet quarried? For the present he must be content with the beginnings, of which to gain first the confidence and then the obe-

dience of this pretty, sensitive, well-endowed woman was the most important.

Already, even in their first short interview of one hour, he had made some way with her. He had got her to promise that she would use her influence with her husband should he oppose her wish to support the two new schemes—which were all that he exposed to-day—of district-visiting and the surpliced choir. He had got her to confess that, though she was the happiest woman in the world—quite the happiest; repeated with suspicious fervour—life at Crossholme was rather dreary, and religion without ceremonial fatally poor and unsatisfactory. He had put the words into her mouth, and he made her assent to them. She had not known that it was an advanced ritual for which her soul had been hungering all this time; that she sighed when she looked at the sunset for want of candles on the altar, and processions round the church; or that tears came into her eyes when she sang certain sentimental old songs because the saints' days were not observed and they had no harvest-home thank-offerings. Had she confessed truly, she would have said it was quite another thing; but as he had told her with a sweet smile, courtly, kind, and patronizing all in one, that he could read her like an

open book—"an open book of goodly print and fair illuminations," he added, thinking flattery like everything else lawful that should win power to the Church—why, she had smiled and blushed and said that his penetration was marvellous; that he was very kind; that she would be glad indeed to see his views established; and that in fact she would help him to the utmost of her ability:—which was about the best hour's work, looking at things from his point of view, that the Honourable and Reverend Launcelot Lascelles had ever accomplished.

"I can scarcely say how happy it has made me, to find you so ready to put your hand to the good work," he said with just the right amount of enthusiasm and gratitude. More might have startled her; only so much warmed and animated. "And you yourself will gain so immeasurably in happiness—happy as you now are—when you feel that you have brought such a glorious duty into your life."

"All duty helps one's happiness," said Hermione, rather vaguely.

"But duty to God through His Church the most," returned the vicar with impressive gravity.

She raised her eyes to his as he spoke. His tone half frightened her. If she wanted a new excitement, some

fresh emotion, she did not want to be put all at once into religious fetters; and, like so many, she mixed up gloom and religion as inseparable. He seemed to read her thoughts with that quick perception of his which was like another sense.

"And in the Church," he said quietly, "there is such ever-varying interest, such a wide and healthy and affectionate companionship, that all the best human instincts are cultivated at the same time that the work of faith is being carried on. We are a world in ourselves—the most cheerful, the most united, and the happiest to be found anywhere:—a band of brothers and sisters all working towards a common end, and emulous only in doing good according to the directions of the Church, through the Superior."

His picture re-assured her.

"I have always thought that I should like to belong to some kind of organization," she said. "It must give one such a feeling of support."

"Yes; as you will prove," he answered.

"But my husband?" she objected timidly.

He smiled. "We do not come between husband and wife because we wish the services to be well performed, and the authority of the Church acknowledged

by the laity!" he answered soothingly but with a touch of sarcasm. "You need have no fear on that head, Mrs. Fullerton. The sole chance of collision between you and your husband is, if he refuses to allow you free exercise of your own conscience—and your own means. From all that I hear he will not; and from all that I see"—gallantly—"he could not, if you exert your influence over him and win him to consent."

"He is very, very good," she answered; "but he has such a dread of the whole thing!"

"He will be won over," returned Mr. Lascelles with a cheerful smile. "He is a candid person—so says report; and though now notoriously astray, yet, believe me, God will not leave him always in error—and you will be the chosen instrument to bring him into the light of truth."

She sighed.

"I should be very glad," she answered; but she did not kindle at the thought. She knew the ground too well to believe in what was well-meant encouragement, truly, but futile, because founded on ignorance of the real state of things.

Then she was silent, and a certain change passed over her face as she caught the sound of her husband's

footsteps through the hall. He opened the door just as Mr. Lascelles was saying in a perfectly natural voice:

"What a magnificent view you have from this south window. It seems to me the most perfect I have seen."

"Oh, Richard, Mr. Lascelles," said Hermione, with an unusual nervousness in her manner. Then, as if recollecting herself: "My husband," she added, looking at her visitor.

The two men met; looked at each other fixedly; and shook hands. So do men before the fight which may end in the death of one of them. They knew that they met as foes, and they mutually measured their strength and took the ground in that first searching glance. Absolutely unlike, they were yet well matched. They were of the same age; both handsome, well-educated gentlemen; both entirely sincere in their convictions; both positive that they had found the truth and ready to defend their principles to the death. Mr. Lascelles, tall, courtly, graceful; with a high forehead and smooth-shaven face; thin lips closing in a firm and colourless line, but mobile and full of expression when in speech; a high thin nose, the transparent nostrils of which easily quivered and dilated; a narrow but high

head, and short coal-black hair already thinning about the temples; a nervous organization betokening a nature full of hidden fire and restrained eagerness; with manners of singular grace and courtliness, but through all their polish the pride of the aristocrat and the scorn of one who holds himself intellectually superior to the mass, and spiritually illumined where others are dark, breaking out in every look and feature;—was ecclesiastic to his finger tips.

Richard, with curling hair as thick and luxuriant now as when he was twenty, but with more white in it than chestnut; a bushy beard and moustache veiling the full kind mouth but not concealing the bright good-humoured smile that so often came on it; his dark grey eyes, speculative, mild and calm; his manner not so courtly as the other's, but more genial; his latent energy as great but less nervous, less impatient; for the irrepressible pride and sarcasm of the conscious superior substituting that subtle deference, that patience with ignorance which shows the man to whom humanity is sacred—looked in his turn what he was—a philosopher untouched by personal sorrow or spiritual disquiet; glad of such light as he had found in proved fact, and for the rest content with darkness till full illumination should come.

But, deep as was the antagonism between them, the beginning of things was trivial enough.

"You have not been long here, I think?" said Mr. Fullerton in his rich voice and rather slow utterance. "We were talking of you at breakfast this morning, and arranging when we should call."

"Thank you," said Mr. Lascelles with a slight smile. "Your visit to my sister will be welcome, when she has arranged her home affairs so as to be able to receive you. That will be social; this of mine to you is functional. I am making acquaintance with all my parishioners, as their priest—not as a householder just yet."

"Priests are not much in my line," said Richard, quite simply and as of course. "The vicar is a neighbour, and so far one of ourselves; but I make the distinction between the man and his office."

Mr. Lascelles raised his eyes. They were not handsome in form or colour, but they were keen and searching. He had the habit of keeping them for the most part lowered, with the taught and artificial humility of the Romish priest, but he used them with effect when he did look up. He raised them now, suddenly, swiftly, and looked full into Richard Fullerton's face.

"A distinction without a difference," he answered. "A priest is always a priest, and does not put on his character with his surplice."

"Only the neighbour and the gentleman is recognized in this house," said Mr. Fullerton, with the same kind of simplicity of truth, but perfectly urbane.

"Yes, I have heard something of that," said Mr. Lascelles, even more urbane than his host. "But," with sudden frankness, "that is not my affair."

"No," said Richard, "it is mine."

"What is my affair," resumed Mr. Lascelles, as if he had not heard him; though Hermione had flushed and looked across at her husband uneasily—why flourish his flag so aggressively, so obtrusively? she thought—"and a serious matter too, is to get the parish into good working order and the service into decent condition. I find everything in disorder—everything neglected. The church services are disgraceful—the choir nowhere—the whole thing deplorable; and I must appeal to my parishioners for support. The first thing that I have to do is to divide the parish into districts, of which I must ask the several ladies of the place to be my visitors. I came here to-day to secure the services of Mrs. and Miss Fullerton."

"My wife and daughter will, I fancy, scarcely join you in your church-work," said Richard with a tranquil smile. He felt so sure of his own!

"No? Not to do kindly services to our poorer brethren?—not to help a struggling woman, say, with a friendly word in season?—not to show those who suffer that we sympathize with them and understand their needs?—not to comfort them in their afflictions?—aid them in the dark hours where friendly sympathy can do so much? You, who are said to feel so much zeal for humanity, can scarce refuse that!"

Mr. Lascelles spoke with fervour; his eyes glittering with the heat of the struggle that had begun so soon, and on the issue of which he based so much of the future; but he was entire master of himself and his methods, and took the tone which he thought most efficacious to his purpose. Then turning to Mrs. Fullerton, he said appealingly:

"Mrs. Fullerton, your woman's heart will plead my cause and the cause of the poor with your husband. Wife and mother yourself, you know that I am asking from you the duty owed by one woman to another, and I feel sure that you cannot refuse me! What do I pray of you?—to take a certain district and to look

to the poor dwelling within its area as your special care, so that when they are sick you will visit them, when in sorrow comfort them, when in want relieve them. Can you refuse?"

"Indeed, Richard," said Hermione shyly, "I, and I am sure that Virginia too, would like to have a district to look after. It would be something to interest us as well as doing good to the poor," with a faint sigh which Mr. Lascelles caught and her husband did not. "And we ought to do some good in the parish," she added.

"You do already, my dear, a great deal of good," said Richard with surprise. "You have your working women and your old pensioners and your soup kitchen—why! it seems to me that you do an immense amount of kindly work among the poor."

"Not under organization," said Mr. Lascelles.

"Which is just what I object to; church organization is the leaven that ruins all, in my mind."

"Surely not! It is order that saves the world from chaos and destruction," cried Mr. Lascelles; "you must allow that, Mr. Fullerton, standing every inch on your own ground. Sporadic activities are of no value

anywhere. It is the closely serried phalanx that carries all before it."

"And this is a phalanx of which I do not wish any one belonging to me to form a part," said Richard, rather more slowly than usual.

"Not for the good of humanity?—the simple relief of physical misery?—and you the friend of man!" Again Mr. Lascelles fixed his bright keen eyes on the face before him; and, looking at it, smiled. "This is no question of doctrine," he said, as if coaxing a child to look behind the screen where some ugly phantom had been thrown; "it is merely one of kindly practice; and I think we both see that your wife wishes it."

"My wife would do nothing against my wish," said Richard, turning to her with a confident air. Mr. Lascelles also looked at her, his eyebrows slightly arched.

"I do not think there is anything in this to pain you, dear," said Hermione gently; "it is only to visit the poor."

It was rarely indeed that she ever held her own against his desire. Her worst show of displeasure against him had never been more than the childish pettishness, the half-innocent waywardness of a pretty

woman who thinks herself unappreciated—of a loving one who thinks herself unduly neglected. But now her promise to Mr. Lascelles compelled her; and indeed Richard was unreasonable to object, she thought; there was nothing wrong in having a district and going about among the poor!

Her husband's quiet face clouded for a moment with perplexity rather than displeasure. The shadow passed as quickly as it came.

"You are the mistress of your own actions, my dear," he said pleasantly; "if you wish it, by all means."

"Then may I count on you and Miss Fullerton?" the vicar asked in a matter-of-fact way, looking down as he took out his bulky pocketbook and made an entry. His voice was clear, but his nostrils quivered. He had gained the first victory, and he accepted it as an omen. Holding his hand where he had written her name, but not looking up at Hermione—"yourself and your daughter?" he said again.

She turned to Richard.

"Do you object to Virginia's joining me?" she asked in quite her own manner of sweet submission for love's sake: the manner which, with her rare untouched

beauty, made her like a great girl more than a matron with a marriageable daughter.

"The daughter goes with the mother," he answered gently. "What you think right for her is right."

He was a man to do things handsomely if at all, and not to skimp his grace in details; but Hermione, womanlike, almost wished that he had made a stand and refused his consent altogether for both; for all that she had just mentally accused him of unreasonableness in objecting; and a sharp pain struck her heart as she thought: "He cares so little for me now, he does not even forbid me to do what he does not like."

Mr. Lascelles, like many of his class, was a man of consummate tact when needed, and of as much boldness when boldness was the better policy. He understood how far he could go, and felt his ground with the skill of a practised pioneer, and rarely made a blunder. The question of the district-visiting settled, there remained that of the choir, and he thought it better to bring this forward at once. He saw that he could count on Hermione, at least for the moment; but he could not be sure of her stability; and he saw that her husband was true to his principles of liberty and self-assertion, and that she could do, with a little pressure, what she

wished. It would score something considerable for him to have the Fullerton name at the head of his subscription list; and in the uphill fight before him he disdained no advantage that he could get. His work would be heavy enough with every advantage. There was the dead weight of long-time indifference and the custom of generations to pull against, as well as the active opposition of those to whom an advanced ritual would be naturally abhorrent—fraught with mysterious danger, no one could exactly say what; and to gain the public support of the confessed free-thinker of the parish, the richest man in it—if rich only by right of his wife; and one of the most respected in all save his diabolical opinions—diabolical enough, however saintly his life might be—to gain the name and aid of Richard Fullerton would be a step of incalculable value. Wherefore he took the leap now at once; the iron was hot and would bear a second blow, he thought.

"Now," he said, his thin lips relaxing into a smile which did not reach his eyes; "now you must help in the formation of a properly trained surpliced choir. The present state of things is simply disgraceful, and must not be allowed to go on."

"No, no," said Richard; "that is impossible. Do

with the services what you like, and what the parish will bear—that is your affair and theirs—but do not ask me to give you a farthing of my money or a helping hand any way."

"If not you—I can understand and respect your opposition; it is fair and consistent—but if not you, then Mrs. Fullerton," said the vicar with his courtly air. "But let us argue the question on its merits. What reasonable objection can you have to this? There are certain fixed musical passages in the service which now are sung abominably; what danger can you see in a well-trained choir, with a distinctive dress, doing that well which now is done ill, but which, well or ill, has to be done somehow?"

"It is the thin end of the wedge," said Richard; "and I cannot lend my name to any part of a system of which I disapprove all the parts alike."

"The thin end of the wedge! Surely, Mr. Fullerton, you are not the man to cherish a superstitious fear or indulge in a baseless fancy; and what is this but a superstitious fear? Are you all to be Romanized—which I suppose is your special *bête noire*—because the Nunc Dimittis and the Te Deum are sung in tolerable time by a trained choir, instead of being, as now,

bawled out in all directions and with more false notes than true?"

"I know all these arguments so well; so did Reineke," said Richard. "They are always the same; the innocent beginnings of the fatal end."

"Then I must appeal again to Mrs. Fullerton," said Mr. Lascelles, a sudden flush on his pallid face and his keen eyes flashing. "She is the Lady of the Manor; and the lay-rector to whom rightfully, and legally, the care of the chancel belongs; and I appeal to her sense of justice and propriety whether things are tolerable as they are, or whether she will not give her assistance to make them if only decently creditable."

Hermione looked distressed, but the vicar's reasoning seemed to her both just and unanswerable.

"Things are certainly very bad," she said in a low voice and as if apologetically; "they ought to be improved, Richard. You see, you do not go to church, and do not know how carelessly the services have been performed, nor how excruciating the singing is."

"Thank you, Mrs. Fullerton," said Mr. Lascelles quickly; "I shall count then on your subscription."

For the first time since her marriage Richard Fullerton's wife wished that she had kept some part of

her income in her own hands. Hitherto she had never desired more than she had had for the asking. She was an indolent woman in every-day affairs; and as the housekeeper kept the books and overlooked the tradesmen's accounts on the one hand, and the milliner supplied her with all that she wanted and sent in the bill on the other, and her husband paid everything by cheques, she had no need for more than the few loose shillings wanted for her visits to the poor; and she had not the trouble or responsibility of keeping a purse, which she was always losing or mislaying. Now however she wished that she had money to use as she liked. with or without her husband's sanction.

"My name shall not go to help any scheme of the kind," repeated Richard, a little more slowly and a great deal more emphatically than his wont.

"But Mrs. Fullerton's?"—asked the vicar, emphasizing the title.

"Mrs. Fullerton thinks as I do," replied Hermione's husband.

"Surely not," cried Mr. Lascelles. "The Lady of the Manor—the lay rector—refuse to help in the decent ordering of the church services? Forgive me, Mr. Fullerton—you ought to know best, of course—but

I should have thought Mrs. Fullerton too true a woman to sanction the present disorder, and with too lively a sense of her position in the parish to make it possible that she should not see where her duties lay."

Hermione flushed. How he insisted on her rights! But, after all, she was what he said—she was something more than Richard's wife. She was the actual proprietor of all; and had she not her duties? He had insisted on those duties in the conversation which they had had together—insisted on them strongly, and as if they were too patent to need subtlety or delicacy of handling.

"Oh, we settled that long ago," said Richard, turning to his wife with a smile. "We revised the old Latin speech, and made it after our own pattern. Where she is Lady, I am Lord."

"You refuse then?" Mr. Lascelles asked quickly; also turning to her. "You wish the present disgraceful state of things to continue, and throw the weight of your influence and your name into the scale of disorder, neglect, and artistic unloveliness? You must remember, Mrs. Fullerton, that, right or wrong—I am not here to argue that part of the question—the Established Church is a fact which cannot be got rid of. The question then is:—Shall it be an elevating, refining, and ennobling

fact, or one that does more harm than good by its want of decency and artistic truth?"

"Things are very bad at Crossholme, certainly," said Hermione; "and indeed, dear Richard, I should like to see them improved! I should like to subscribe to the choir. In my position, it is only right."

"You must act according to your sense of right," her husband said, after a pause. "In my position" ran in his ears like some strange speech of which he had not the key. "You know my feelings, but I do not coerce yours, nor forbid your action."

"Whatever your private feelings may be, the fact is simply this, that the musical parts of the services are at present very inharmoniously rendered, and that it would be better to have them well done, if only for the sake of good art," said Mr. Lascelles, arguing the question on its evident merits.

"That is only reasonable," put in Hermione; "and, after all, Richard, what possible harm can come of a well-trained choir?"

"The game usually begins with a well-trained surpliced choir," said Richard; "the game that ends in the denial of all freedom of thought, and the substitution of the most monstrous superstition for truth."

"Do you scent Romanism and the Inquisition in a dozen linen surplices to cover the ugly and not always decent jackets of so many school-boys?" asked Mr. Lascelles with open sarcasm.

"Richard!" cried Hermione in remonstrance. She thought it so ill-bred in her husband to insist on his dislike to Christianity in the presence of a clergyman, and one like Mr. Lascelles!

"My opinions on this subject are not new, and they are well-known," said Richard very slowly. "I understand the whole thing only too well."

"I am sorry to find you so bitter," Mr. Lascelles answered with perfect temper; "and, as I must think, scarcely fair to yourself. But the question presses for a settlement, and I have already trespassed on your time more than I ought to have done. What am I to do then?—consider you as opponents to my choir, or put you down as subscribers?"

"I am an opponent," said Richard.

"And you, Mrs. Fullerton?"

"No; I cannot call myself an opponent," she answered, looking down.

"A subscriber then?"

She turned appealingly to her husband.

"Do you wish to subscribe, Hermione?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered in a lowered voice. "I ought to do so."

"You are mistress of your own actions," he said as he had said before; but only after a moment's silence. He was a little bewildered and scarcely knew how things were. "Subscribe if you will, my dear," he added more naturally. "How much?"

"Twenty pounds," said Hermione, ignorant of the value of money.

"So much? You are more than generous," said her husband, looking disconcerted. "I should have thought five, or even one, sufficient."

"As Lady of the Manor?" sneered Mr. Lascelles, always touching the same chord.

"Not too generous, surely," pleaded Hermione. "You see, dear, I ought to do more than any one else."

"Twenty pounds be it, then. Shall I write the cheque now?"

"Thanks," said Mr. Lascelles. "If you please. I shall not have to inculcate on you the duty of obedience," he continued in a peculiar voice, when he and Hermione were alone. It was a voice rasped with sarcasm, for all its honeyed words of praise. "You are the model of

conjugal submission, and I foresee will one day be as dutiful a daughter of the Church as you are now a wife."

"I have always tried to do my duty," stammered Hermione, feeling that he was mocking her, and that he disapproved while he commended.

"And even more than the strict lines of duty. You, the owner of all, cannot even write your own cheques—cannot even subscribe for the well-ordering of your own property—without the permission of your husband, whose life you have made?—Admirable! but almost too admirable!"

"We have always lived like this," said Hermione.

"The doctrine of perfection carried out to its ultimate, but in a wrong direction," returned Mr. Lascelles, below his breath.

Then Richard came back, and soon after the new vicar took his leave.

"The thin end of the wedge, indeed!" he said to himself, as he walked down the park road, and drew his breath hard. "The thin end of the wedge, and soon the thick!—when the power of this accursed infidel will be split asunder, the Church delivered from a formidable foe, and the souls of a now lost household saved."

CHAPTER III.

THE WORK TO BE DONE.

All the land round about Crossholme had once belonged to the Church. In the Abbey grounds were part of the cloisters and the remains of a grand east window overgrown with ivy, where the owls made their nests and the bats found their resting-place, and whence fragments of fine old carving were still at times turned up from beneath the soil. Indeed, had any one cared, it would have been easy to have traced out the whole ground-plan of the monastery by the fragments which were left and by the plates in early county histories before the ruins had become so shattered as they were now. But the place had come into the possession of the Fullertons before archæology was in fashion, and the ruins were—just ruins, which had given the stones for the new house when it was built some hundred and fifty years ago, and out of which the builder had also made capital lime for mortar. Still, there it was—Church property self-determined; and the names which still

clung to other places in the neighbourhood bore evidence to the former ecclesiastical character of the estate, if indeed further evidence than the old title-deeds were wanting.

Churchlands, where the Molyneux family lived, had been an old farm leased by the Benedictines to a far-away ancestor of the present proprietor, who had bid for the holding when the Dissolution was ordained. This ancestor, one Beaulieu, was by no means in the direct line, and on the female side if at all; but the last Molyneux had traced the stream, at least to his own satisfaction, and if he had had to make hypothetical bridges across unquestionable gaps, why, all genealogies show the like, and he was no more daring than his neighbours.

Monkshall, the property of young Ringrove Hardisty, had been a kind of offset of the Abbey, where were lodged with more or less of pomp and hospitality those strangers whom it would have been inconvenient to receive in the monastery itself. The very name of the parish, Crossholme, was entirely ecclesiastical; and Mr. Lascelles felt like a man unlawfully dispossessed—a son unjustly disinherited—when he looked round on the beautiful country and well-favoured land which the

Church had once called her own, and which was now held by usurpers and heretics. For to him the National Church as it is had lapsed greatly; and he, like all his party, had vowed himself to do his best to purge it of its sin of Erastianism, and to restore it to its supremacy as in olden times.

Mr. Lascelles was not in any sense a hypocrite—not one of those pious mountebanks who pretend the faith which in their secret soul they despise. On the contrary, he was earnest and ardent to fanaticism; but he was insincere just so far as this—that he disdained no weapons by which he thought he might deliver a telling blow; and he knew so well how to make himself all things to all men, that he could even feign liberality and the allowance of private judgment when talking with unbelievers whom he thought it worth while to conciliate. He was thoroughly alive to his good gifts of person, birth, and manners, which he counted on as aids and auxiliaries, as a man reckons up his various sources of income when he is laying out his expenditure. He knew that his intellect was clear and keen; and that his knowledge of books and men was greater than that of most. He even understood that a romantic name like his—a name savouring of chivalry and knighthood and sentimental

romanticism, and thus uniting the splendour of man with the religious authority of the priest—was a small point in his favour; at least with women who need to have their imagination warmed as much as the average man demands that his reason shall be satisfied. And he understood to the fullest the value of women as helpers as well as subjects. Their sympathies, and the submissive activities of young men still in the first ardour and fervour of their age and while retaining something of the feminine element in their zeal for faith and their abhorrence of doubt, were the allies to which he trusted. For men of mature judgment and independent thought, reasoning, cool, far-sighted men, he left them alone—so far.

His avowed work here at Crossholme was to bring the services of the Church into conformity with a more advanced ritual; his secret dream to get back some of the forfeited property if he could so far work on the consciences of the present holders. From being one of the wealthiest monasteries in England, Crossholme had been carved down into one of the poorest livings, fit only for a man of independent means to hold. If, then, he could so win over to the truth any of those now possessing unlawful lands—he must always insist on the spiritual sin of their possession—as to induce them to restore to

the Church what rightfully belonged to the Church, he should have done one good deed in his life, and fulfilled to some extent the purpose to which he had dedicated himself.

The work that he had set himself to do was hard, but, perhaps for that very reason, all the more attractive. A trial of strength was of all things that in which he most delighted, essentially a fighting man as he was, though his weapons were only mental. When he reckoned up his chances they were not so entirely desperate as they seemed at first sight. True, there was Richard Fullerton in his way—the most formidable adversary that he had. A man of large means, of local influence, of blameless life, and universally respected—yes, he was a formidable adversary indeed, in appearance. But looking nearer? Mr. Lascelles, knowing the world, knew that a man openly professing rationalism—which Christians take to be high-polite for atheism—is a man having no solid foothold in English esteem. He may be as virtuous as Marcus Aurelius, as truth-loving as Socrates, as great as Plato, but—he disbelieves the Seven Days, the handful of clay, the rib and the Tower of Babel; he denies that the sun and moon were ever stayed; he proves by anatomy that Jonah could not have been

swallowed by a whale; he doubts the cruse of oil and the ravens that fed the prophet; and he asks how all the kingdoms of a sphere could have been seen from the top of any mountain in Judea or elsewhere; and it is therefore supposed that he is capable of every crime that can disgrace humanity, and that if he have not committed himself hitherto it has been for want of temptation, not for want of will to yield, should that temptation come. No; Richard Fullerton's position was impregnable to look at; but there were weak places in this brazen tower, and it was his business as a priest and a teacher of truth to find them out, and bring down that man of sin to destruction.

If the wife could be gained, he knew that the husband would neither make a party of opposition nor be able to head it to any serious result if made; for if she could be won over, Mr. Lascelles, who had learnt all about his parishioners long before he took the living, knew that he would have carried the key of the position. Without money what could Richard Fullerton do? and was it not in her power to revoke her former deed of resignation and take back her lapsed rights? Could she be won so far as this?

Young enough still to feel the want of some passion-

ate interest in life, Hermione was at that age when a woman begins to long for new emotions. Her husband has become by now only her friend, and any romantic impulse himward is stale and dead, if not ridiculous, and sure to be repulsed. Her children, if she has many and is strongly maternal, may certainly supply all her mental cravings, by love, by occupation, by the constant interest of their ever-changing development. If she has only one—a daughter, say—she may renew her own youth by sympathy with her girl's fresh feelings and new experiences.

But there was nothing of all this for Hermione. More a natural nun than a likely wife, yearning for what neither father nor mother could give her, and indifferent to all that the world had to offer, Virginia was as little sufficient for her mother's happiness as mistress of her own; and Mrs. Fullerton was therefore, as Mr. Lascelles partly knew and partly divined, unoccupied ground waiting only the hand of the tiller. What then might not be done with one whose life was rusting for the want of using? Religious enthusiasm, all the more potent because new; the constant occupation given by the Church; the pleasant fluttering of the female spirit, found in submission to a new direction, a

new influence, a new love if you will, which the conscience approves and which neither the husband nor society can condemn; the excitement of assisting in the development of a stately ritual in her own church, and the natural human pride of being pointed out as the beneficent donor, the generous benefactor; the pressure brought to bear by an organization of which she had made herself part; all this would give her the new interest, the passionate life that she needed, and make her his plastic instrument. Could he reach her? He thought he could. He had seen enough in that one visit to have proved her amenable to his influence and to be touched by an appeal to her conscientiousness, her vanity, and her sentiment all delicately interwoven. If he could hold her securely, he could destroy her husband's accursed influence in the place and bring back to the Church—or banish from the place—the souls which he had warped and led to ruin.

And for the rest? There were the two young Molyneux's—Cuthbert and his sister Theresa, living with their aunt Catherine at Churchlands. Cuthbert had just returned from Cambridge, where he had taken only a moderate degree—not disgracefully low, but not honourably high—and where he had distinguished

himself by his romantic Ruskinism, his enthusiastic desire to do good and serve God, rather than by his zeal for science or his devotion to lectures and the classics. He was thus far a convert ready made, and Mr. Lascelles anticipated here an easy success. His young sister, Theresa, was enthusiastic like himself, warm and devoted; their Aunt Catherine was good, gushing, weak, and with no more reasoning faculties than a child;—Churchlands was a rich property; and the outlook was bright.

Young Ringrove Hardisty, at Monkshall, was not so promising. He was the ideal of one kind of Englishman, but not the kind which goes readily into ecclesiastical excesses. He was commonly reputed to have been tainted by Richard Fullerton's diabolical influence and to be nearly as great an infidel as himself. He was not a man of science like Richard, but especially a man of action—one of the born rulers of a country society. He was a tall, powerful, handsome young fellow of nine-and-twenty, with the traditional blue eyes and curling, short-cut golden hair of the Saxon race to which he emphatically belonged; a man incapable of meanness, of cruelty, of subterfuge, or of cowardice, but also incapable of mysticism or of spiritual intoxication; and though generous and noble more likely to

be a benevolent despot in his dealings with others than a submissive son of the Church, or a husband whose wife held the reins. From all accounts, Ringrove Hardisty was not a likely subject for manipulation. The only hold on him came through his known love for Virginia Fullerton. She gained, with her mother, he might be brought within the fold of the dutiful children, as wild elephants are cajoled by the tame ones.

Going on, the Nesbitts at Newlands offered only pretty Beatrice as in any way likely for his purpose. Mrs. Nesbitt was a sweet kindly-natured woman, loving and soft truly; but she was not *désœuvrée* like Mrs. Fullerton, nor gushing and weak like Miss Catherine Molyneux. She had a family of ten children to look after, of whom the eldest was Beatrice—called familiarly Bee when not Beata, or sometimes more irreverently Belva, on account of that curly head of hers, and broad natural fringe, which some one said was like a pretty little wild bull's. And naturally such a mother as Mrs. Nesbitt finds in her family that kind of healthy and absorbing occupation which leaves a woman no time to dream or to regret, occupation which taxes all her strength to do the duty lying plain before her without the need of casting about for that which is irrelevant and

adventitious. Mr. Nesbitt himself, bred a lawyer and now the county court judge of the district, was a shrewd, hard-headed man, with an Englishman's dread of ecclesiastical domination, and certainly not likely to make one of the new vicar's vanguard. But he was a Conformist; and if the whole parish were swept into the ritualistic net, in all probability he would find himself too among the meshes. Nevertheless, he was one to be handled gently, and to be craftily blindfolded while led.

The Campbells and the Stauntons, the Davidsons and the Lawleys, were people of that uncertain quality on whom no man can count. They were of the second set, and would either follow implicitly as their social superiors led, or oppose them openly for the sake of making another party of their own. He could not foresee which way it would be, but he thought the chances were in favour of the former. If the latter, he believed that he should be able to make them feel excluded from the parochial aristocracy, not that they had excluded him and his.

And truly things ecclesiastical had fallen into a sufficiently bad state at Crossholme to justify a sweeping reformation. The wave of church restoration, which has

swept over almost all England, had not stirred the sleepy shallows of Crossholme, nor washed away the unsightly dust that had accumulated through many generations of neglect and indifference. The pews were still like cattle pens, of all shapes and sizes and heights, where the congregation stood in all positions, and where comfortable corners and high baize-lined backs still afforded snug sleeping-places out of the preacher's sight. The choir, such as it was, sat in the raised seats at the end; the school-mistress played the harmonium which was always out of tune and of which she was notably afraid, while the more daring lads played marbles or gave shrill whistles when they were kneeling, and the more timid girls only giggled and passed lollipops from mouth to mouth. The chancel was large and bare. There were only a few backed benches in it for the servants of the Abbey, Monkshall, and Churchlands; and the Tables with the Creed and Lord's Prayer, so old and time-worn as to be almost illegible, were the sole ornaments on the white-washed walls. The whole condition of things was haphazard and neglected, so far as the church went; but the village was wonderfully moral, and "Mr. Fullerton's men" were a splendid set of fellows, who did much to give a tone to the whole

place. They were men against whom slander itself could find nothing to say, save that they too disbelieved in the Seven Days and the staying of the sun and moon; and they did not come to church, but went to Mr. Fullerton's scientific lectures instead; and that they held the modern doctrines concerning evolution and the origin of species. But of what good is it that working men should be moral, sober, thoughtful, and in every way respectable and well-conducted, if they do not believe in verbal inspiration and the power of one man to bind or loose the sins of another? The Church wants obedient sons, not moral infidels; and between the brigand who believes and the atheist who passes his life in charity and welldoing, she has most pleasure in the former and least hope of the latter.

All the same, things were atrociously neglected. Granted a church at all, Mr. Lascelles had not only his work cut out for him, but there was a crying necessity for beginning that work now at once.

Holding to the celibacy of the clergy as one of the strongest purchases over women and men alike, Mr. Lascelles knew the importance of feminine aid extra to active district visitors and devoted church servitors. The mother is wanted as well as the high-

priest, and the Vicarage without a mistress would have only half its influence. Therefore he brought with him his eldest sister, a woman of about forty whom a sentimental godmother had insisted on naming Araminta, but who, a few years ago, had taken Saint Agnes as her patron saint, and had adopted her name in token of her special dedication. "Sister Agnes" she called herself officially; but all the same she never quite forgot that she was the Honourable Miss Lascelles condescending to humility.

She had once been a showy, handsome-looking girl, and was even now well-favoured and singularly well-mannered; with that same fine aristocratic flavour running through her voice and air and gestures as ran through her brother's. Some perhaps would have said that she was a trifle too slow and sweet, and what irreverent folks would call silky, or even sickly, in her words and ways; but when a well-favoured woman gives up the pomps and vanities of the world for simplicity and religion, who is there that dare throw stones? You can but prove your faith by your works; and she had, so far, proved hers.

In person she was tall and thin, with a slender waist and flexible spine, and a long throat bearing a

small neat head. Her black hair, touched here and there with grey, was braided close and smooth under a white muslin cap trimmed with a narrow plaited frill. She always dressed in black alpaca, with a white collar and cuffs—her gowns made short round the instep, and without train or trimming. Her walking-dress was a large black cloak and a black cottage bonnet with a long black veil; and she wore neither gloves nor boots—only thick-soled high-low shoes. Her sole ornament was a large black cross which was suspended from a bead girdle round her waist. She was a member of one of the Anglican Sisterhoods, but she had received permission from her director and the superior to accompany her brother to Crossholme for a time, that she might aid him in his work and lend her strength also to the conversion of a parish which, moral as it was, they regarded as little better than heathen.

When Mr. Lascelles came back from his first survey of his parishioners, his sister met him in the garden.

"Well?" she said with her customary smile; "you have sped well?"

"Beyond expectation," he answered. "I shall carry the parish in time; I have already got a footing in the Abbey."

"That is good news indeed, Launcelot. Did you find Mr. Fullerton so plastic?"

"Yes, and no. He does not thwart his wife; I can influence her. She is eating out her heart in her present mode of life. Church-work will save her from herself, and give her a new interest altogether."

"She will not be let rust in idleness if she gets into your hands," said Miss Lascelles with a demure smile.

"No," he answered; "there is so much to do here, that all who will work will have to work."

"Are they nice people, Launcelot?"

"Very; of their kind; which is bad enough at present. Mrs. Fullerton is charming, and the young daughter, whom I saw only for a few minutes, seems singularly sweet. You must undertake her, Agnes; she must be one of your lambs. Poor child! as things are she is but a lost one, I fear."

"I will do my best for her, and I hope that I shall do her good," returned his sister. "But Mr. Fullerton—what is he like?"

"Pleasant and well-bred enough, but an outrageous infidel; one of those presumptuous fools puffed up with a little pseudo-knowledge who think themselves capa-

ble of settling every subject, and who boast that they believe in nothing which they cannot see and touch—a rank materialist, living without God in the world. As a man he is well enough, but as a soul he is as much in the clutches of the Devil as was ever Judas. I feel that in fighting against him and his diabolical influence here I am fighting against Satan in bodily form."

The vicar spoke warmly; had he not been a sacred man, it might have been said he spoke with undeniable temper.

"And you are," said his sister. "I hold all infidels to be possessed. They are the emissaries of the Evil One, and this so-called modern science is the means by which he works. But you will conquer in the end, Launcelot. The Church is stronger than the Pit."

"By God's grace," answered Launcelot; and then they both went into the house, glad that the good work had been so far begun.

CHAPTER IV.

SISTER AGNES.

Of the ladies in Crossholme, Hermione was the first to call on the new vicar's as yet unknown sister, because the first to be told that the house was now so far in order as to render it possible to receive visitors; and told in a manner that conveyed a special and intentional grace. In all his intercourse with Mrs. Fullerton, which somehow he managed to make of daily occurrence—though he never saw her husband and not always Virginia—Mr. Lascelles gave her to understand that she was his first thought, his principal social care; and that both for herself as a human being—"the most interesting woman he had seen for years," he told her once, "uniting the simplicity and innocence of a child with the experience and strength of a woman"—and on account of her position here as the lay rector—how he hated those rights of hers!—the largest landed proprietor of the place and the Lady of the Manor, she was the one who ought to be most considered.

He was never weary of thanking her for what she had already done for God and the parish, while drawing vague but gorgeous pictures of the future when she would do yet more. And somehow he always contrived to convey the impression that he and she were allies against her husband; but this was only an impression, and so craftily suggested that Hermione never found the moment when to protest against it. She used to ease her conscience by speaking warmly of her husband's goodness when these uncomfortable little shadows were cast; but after a time she was obliged to give up even this not too ardent advocacy, and content herself with wifely loyalty carried in silence. Something in Mr. Lascelles froze the words on her lips, and made her ashamed to bear testimony in favour of her infidel lord. It was the only subject on which he did not agree with her, and where he was not eager to bring his assurance of sympathy. For the rest he was her sworn friend and knight ecclesiastic. Had he not been a celibate clergyman, with so high a standard, the profane would have been justified in imagining that he was flirting with the wife of Richard Fullerton;—he said such soft things to her, and pressed her hand with so much tenderness—fatherly, of course; but tenderness all the same. It was long

since the pretty woman had heard herself so delicately flattered—and ah! how pleasant it was! What a pity that Richard was so dull and heavy and absorbed, instead of being alive at all points like Mr. Lascelles!

By this time, comparatively short as it was, a good deal of ignorant gossip concerning both the vicar and his sister had been set afloat in the place, and monstrous stories passed from lip to lip as to their lives and actions. Many said that they were Jesuits in disguise, if such transparent masks as theirs could be called disguises at all. And some of the more hostile and imaginative among the men prophesied the loss of all parochial liberty, and a time of ecclesiastical tyranny almost as severe as in the olden days when the Abbot was lord of all and the whole population were his serfs forced to obey his will on pain of worldly loss and spiritual excommunication. Some said they were mad; some curled up their lips and said—no, not mad, but bad. Few believed in their real goodness; fewer still in their sincerity—for all that the outer ordering of their lives, by which their faithfulness might be considered best tested, was simple almost to poverty and strict to partial asceticism. They were like foreign birds of strange plumage settling down among the barndoor

fowl which gathered round them, wondering what they were and indisposed to give them welcome, simply because they were strange; and for the first few weeks scarcely a voice was raised in their favour.

Then the vicar, as the vicar, was much disapproved of. He cut up the services into distinct "offices," as he called the various parts; demanded uniformity of position—and that the eastward—at the Creed; and every Sunday gave out some novelty at which his hearers gaped and wondered where things were going to. Now it was Wednesday and Friday morning prayer; now a Saint's day to be observed; now a startling bit of doctrine; and now "early celebration." His sermons were of only twenty minutes' duration; he preached in his surplice and he began his discourse abruptly, without the usual prayer and with only the invocation "In the name of." He bowed and knelt and inclined at strange places in the service; and openly expressed his disgust with things as they were and his intention of changing them radically. And if that was not enough to set a sleepy old conservative parish against its new vicar, what would be?

But Hermione Fullerton stood out boldly from the rest, and spoke of Mr. Lascelles warmly and with

thorough-going commendation. Where others sniffed jesuistry and proclaimed hypocrisy with all the tale of vices given by ignorance to novelty, she made herself his liberal-minded champion and maintained that he wanted only what was right and good for the parish, and that this prejudgment was un-English and unfair.

So it was; but looking at things from the conservative point of view, these innovations were unpleasant, at least in the beginning and until men's minds had become attuned to novelty. And again, looking at things from his own special anti-clerical point of view, her husband had some reason on his side, if also some bitterness, when he one day said to her quietly, after a rather passionate harangue:

"It may be unfair, my dear, to assume that a particular snake of a venomous kind will sting you, and in this belief to kill it as it lies. Still, common knowledge of the breed leads you to suppose that it will if it gets the chance; and you kill it if you can before it has time to kill you. And a knowledge of what priests of every religion have been in all ages, and still are—what they have done to oppress and enslave the minds of men and still do where they have the power—warrants wise men in resisting their first endeavours to gain influence."

"But a clergyman ought to have influence in his own parish. Why is he here, if every ignorant ploughboy is to judge of religion as well as he?" said Hermione, with unusual warmth and acerbity.

"The law gives him more power than is good for him or the people as things are," said Richard. "We need not strengthen his hands by extra grants. For remember, wife, every inch of ground gained by the Church is so much lost to freedom, truth, and science."

"Richard! how can you be so unjust? I have never known you so bad as this before," she cried almost passionately. "The Church has been the best friend of man for all these ages; and you speak like this!"

He laughed his pleasant good-humoured laugh.

"So bad as this before?" he said. "Am I always so bad then in your eyes, my wife? And when was the Church the best friend of man? When the Huguenots were massacred? when the auto da fé was a common institution in Spain? when Servetus was burnt? and when Romanists and Protestants lighted the fires in Smithfield in impartial alternation?"

"You uphold liberality in principle," said Hermione, not answering him, but going back to her personalities which interested her more than did his historical remi-

niscences; "and you are just as illiberal as any one else when you speak of what you happen to dislike. It is really too bad of you, calling Mr. Lascelles a snake!—your own clergyman, and so good and kind and well-bred as he is! I wonder at you, Richard."

"I know the tribe, my dear, better than you do; and granting them all the private virtues to which they can lay claim, I dread them as mental guides—as spiritual leaders—as much as I should dread that obnoxious snake, which offended you, if he came to coil himself about your throat or mine."

"I will not discuss the subject with you; you are too unreasonable," said Hermione loftily.

"Do not be vexed with me, for a matter that cannot touch either of us personally," he returned kindly. "Mr. Lascelles may be privately good or bad; that is not our affair; and for the rest, his influence will never invade our house, and so what is it to us? We are one thing, he another; and there is no reason why we should dispute about him between ourselves, is there?" He leaned forward to pat her flushed face, while she turned away from him. "Don't, Richard!" she said pettishly, in a parenthesis. "If you like him, dear," her husband continued, rather astonished at her petulance, but sup-

posing it was nothing, and certainly not of so much importance as to be noticed; "I will not annoy you by saying that I do not. But in truth, wife, I do not, and," more gravely, "I should be glad if you saw him and the whole subject with my eyes."

"That I cannot do and do not wish to do," said Hermione, still peevish and unlike her usual self. "I do not hate religion as you do, Richard. I believe in God and the Church and a future life and the value of prayer; and I see Mr. Lascelles as a devoted clergyman—a good high-minded Christian gentleman: and you see him as some monster."

"No, not a monster, only a priest; the consecrated enemy to truth and freedom; the barrier *ex officio* to progress," he answered, finding that roll-call of articles of faith a little difficult tc digest.

"Truth!" retorted Hermione disdainfully. "How do you or any of us know what truth is?"

"We may all know what it is not, if we choose to use our reason," he said. "It is not a collection of old-world fables, current at a time when science was nowhere, when the laws of evidence were not understood, and when men were so ignorant that they could be made to believe the most monstrous lies which the

imagination could invent; just as the Breton peasantry of our own day are made to believe in trumped-up miracles."

"I suppose, though you do think so hardly of our vicar, you do not object to visit him? to my calling on Miss Lascelles? Of course I am your wife and have to obey you; and if you refuse to allow me to go, I cannot and will not. But I suppose I may? I have your permission?" said Hermione, shifting her ground suddenly and speaking with a disagreeable air of false submission as unlike her usual self as was indeed all the rest. "I suppose your insane hatred of the Church does not go so far as this?" she continued; "your dislike of the Bible does not include ill-breeding and want of hospitality to a gentleman and lady, because they happen to be our clergyman and his sister?"

He laughed again. Her ill-humour with him was patent, but it was so childish that he could not choose but smile at it. She had never been so petulant as this; and Richard was too philosophic and easy-going to cross swords readily; especially with a woman, and that woman his wife, so trusted in, so beloved.

"No," he said. "Call on them by all means. Ask hem to dinner here if you like, and as often as you like.

As neighbours, my house is open to them; it is only the priest to which I object."

"And you?" she said, not noticing his permission. Somehow it grated on her more than it pleased. "Will you not call with me, Richard?"

"No; take my card; that will do as well, or perhaps better. Mr. Lascelles and I have not much in common, and I do not wish to break through my habits of not giving up the afternoon for a man whom I do not specially affect. You and Virginia can go; and my pasteboard."

"Well, I will do as you wish, of course," she answered with a sigh. "I think you are very wrong, Richard, very unjust and illiberal, and not acting well; but you are your own master, of course, and I will make your excuses."

"Give me a kiss after all that storm," he said, half tenderly, half playfully.

She turned away her eyes. She was still ruffled and heated, still unlike herself altogether, and in no loving mood anyhow.

"Don't be so foolish," she said again; and went out, leaving him with a certain numbness rather than pain, like a person startled and amazed. He did not often

ask for a kiss in these days; and never before now had she refused a glad response to his tenderness when it had come. Now something seemed to have stolen into her heart that had hardened it, at least for the time.

Mother and daughter made a strange contrast to the vicar's sister in her severe dress and studied absence of all grace and ornament. Hermione in a light grey silk delicately touched with pink, and small grey bonnet also with the same light touches of pink to give it life set among her golden curls; her wrists clasped with bracelets; her neck in a broad gold chain; her whole attire luxurious, rich, elegant, and in the latest fashion of cut and pattern;—Virginia, in the traditional maiden white, with more simplicity but as much conventional elegance as her mother;—and Miss Lascelles in her Sister's dress, plain, black, and eloquent of her renunciation of the pomps and vanities:—yes, they were indeed strangely contrasted!

The house too which the Fullertons had left and that to which they had come were as unlike as themselves. There everything was costly and luxurious; everything was beautiful in itself, but upheaped, overcrowded, and so far failing in perfect taste—the central idea, if ever there had been one beyond the upholsterer's

notions of things handsome and necessary, having got overlaid by excess in the parts. Here in this drawing-room of the Vicarage the furniture was almost oppressive in its severity, and the general expression was cold and insufficient. The table was deal, with heavy, plainly-squared legs and a plain, unornamented "autumn-leaf" table-cover; the old oak chairs were stiff, hard, and straight-backed, and there was not an armchair, nor a lounge, nor a sofa anywhere. The cold grey walls were hung with a few pictures—all sacred subjects; some in oils, copies from the Old Masters, and some of the Arundel Society set in plain white frames, without even a gilded edge. A few flowers in grès de Flandres vases gave the sole signs of living life there were; but these were only on two brackets which flanked the feet of a large carved ivory crucifix—an antique—that hung against the wall. A Mater Dolorosa was on one side, an Assumption on the other; and below was the hollowed side of a pecten shell. It was a room which suggested more than it expressed, and which was as utterly unlike the ordinary drawing-rooms of society as Sister Agnes herself was unlike the ordinary ladies of the world.

"I am glad to see you," she said with extreme sweet-

ness, coming forward to meet them when the Fullertons were announced, and giving a hand to each. "My brother has told me of you, and I have been longing to make your acquaintance."

Her manner was gracious and cordial, but it was not the grace nor cordiality of society. It was a strange manner altogether, and unlike any that Mrs. Fullerton had ever seen. It was, and was not, condescending; friendly and yet not social; somewhat the manner of an official superior, with a certain false kind of fraternity as if to encourage his inferior. The Honourable Miss Lascelles and Mrs. Fullerton of the Abbey were social equals, and their first meeting would naturally have been one of more or less stiffness; but Sister Agnes, high in the order of grace and Church enlightenment, was in the foremost ranks of a hierarchy where this pretty, well-dressed heathen was but a stranger at the gate—a Gentile in the presence of one of the Chosen. She was as a child needing encouragement and teaching, and Sister Agnes, half unconsciously, treated her as one; patronizing her by the very sweetness and disregard of social formalities with which she had received her.

"You are very good," said Hermione, a little taken aback and yet flattered. "I am much interested in

your brother—in his plans," she answered, half awkwardly.

"Yes, he is a very pure creature; so devoted, so thoroughly in earnest! Our dear Mother Church has no more dutiful son, no stronger champion," said Miss Lascelles smiling.

"He seems to be so," said Hermione, not in the least understanding the worth of what she said; but she knew it was something to which she ought to assent.

"He hopes to do much here," Miss Lascelles continued. "Things have been fearfully neglected, and it will take some time to bring them into order. But we have courage and the consciousness of a good cause and Divine help;—and we count on your support," with a charming smile.

"I shall be happy to do what I can," said Hermione. "I feel the truth of what you say. Things have been neglected. Mr. Aston was old, and no one"—she hesitated.

"No one cared to fan the embers which he allowed to die out." Miss Lascelles finished the broken speech neatly. "Now, however, all will be changed. We must get the parish into good working order, and the services of the Church better organized. And everyone must

help. You, dear Mrs. Fullerton, and your child among the foremost." She took Virginia's hand and looked tenderly into her face. "It is such as you young innocent creatures whom the Church asks to give the first fruits of your strength and life to God; and to you," turning to Hermione, "bountiful woman of means and energy, that she looks for her true support."

But she turned back to Virginia. She knew that Hermione was already somewhat entangled and assigned as her brother's special charge, while the girl was to be hers.

"I shall be very glad to have something to do," said Virginia with quiet intensity, involuntarily clasping the long thin hand held in hers with more fervour than she knew of. "It will be so happy for me to know what to do."

"And you do not now?"

"No," with a half sigh.

"You shall not be long without guidance," said Miss Lascelles. "You will have your district assigned you very soon. The vicar means to speak to you about it to-day, and that will give you an interest beyond what you can imagine now. Then, I am going to establish a Church working society, to meet here at the Vicarage two or three times a week. We want vestments, altar-cloths—

everything! I can show you how the things are to be done. Will you make one of us, Mrs. Fullerton?"

"With pleasure," said Hermione.

"And you, my child?"

"Yes," said Virginia, her face brightening; "I will do anything you wish me to do."

This was a large promise for Richard Fullerton's daughter to make; he who characterized the clergy as snakes, and who was devoting his life to the destruction of their influence and the substitution of knowledge for faith—science for religion. But already Miss Lascelles had touched her;—and if here was to be found food for her starving soul?

At this moment Mr. Lascelles came into the room. He smiled when he saw Hermione sitting there with his sister; but quietly, with reserve—not hilariously, as a man unconsecrated might; and came forward with that kind of tender courtliness, of grave eagerness, which sits so well on a handsome priest.

"So glad to see you!" he said with finely subdued cordiality, pressing Hermione's hand gently as he spoke.

The blood rose up into the pretty woman's fair face. How young she looked! In her light colours, with her fluffy golden hair, fair skin, and flushed cheeks, she did

not look more than five-and-twenty. Grave, pale, if no less beautiful, Virginia might have been her sister rather than her daughter.

"Thank you," she said simply; but she was glad to see his evident pleasure.

"Now come with me into my study, and I will show you how I have mapped out the parish. I want your opinion also on the restorations which I have resolved to make in the church. The chancel will be your care," smiling. "No, you need not bring your daughter. My sister will take care of her."

Mr. Lascelles said all this with perfect courtesy and good breeding, but in the tone of a man accustomed to be obeyed and who did not anticipate refusal now.

"If I can be of use," said Hermione rising; with an odd fluttering at her heart as she left the room, giving to another man than her husband the same unquestioning obedience, the same womanly submission that had marked her life with him. How strange it was to have this new authority over her—shadowy, subtle, vague, as it yet was! but it was pleasant in spite of its strangeness.

"And now, child, tell me something of yourself," said Miss Lascelles to Virginia, drawing a low stool close to her own chair. "Come and sit at my knee, like

my child, which you are to be in Christ, and tell me of your life."

"I have nothing to tell," said Virginia, raising her eyes, always so full of secret yearning, of nameless melancholy, to the smooth, satisfied face bending down to hers. It was so evidently the dark seeker and the enlightened finder—the unsatisfied life and that which was fulfilled.

"No sense of God's grace; no consciousness of sin and pardon?" she asked.

"No," answered Virginia confusedly. "I have no religious life at all. I wish I had, but I have not. I do not know what to do or what to believe."

"Poor child! poor child! but you shall have now what you want. You are seeking for Christ, and you shall find Him. I, by our Holy Mother Church, will lead your first steps, poor wandering darling, and my brother will consecrate you to the true life. You do not know what happiness is in store for you, child, nor what a load of misery and heaviness you will lose! I can see it all in your face—the yearning, the blankness, the want, the seeking, and the darkness;—all to be supplied from the Everlasting Fountain! Do you say your prayers?"

"Yes, sometimes," said Virginia, tears in her eyes. "But they are not answered; light does not come, though I ask for it."

"It will," said Miss Lascelles. "You believe in the goodness of God, and the influence of the Holy Spirit?" with a reverent movement of her head and hands.

"Yes," she replied; "for some perhaps, but not for myself."

"Do you believe in the power of the Church to enlighten and absolve?" the Sister asked.

"I scarcely know which I believe, Miss Lascelles!" said Virginia, laying her arms across the elder woman's lap; she would not have done so to her own mother. "All is so confused at home! Papa is so good, so good, but he believes in nothing at all—neither in God nor a future life—and mamma seems not to know what is true or what is not. We go to church; but then we do not keep Sunday as Sunday at home, and we never have prayers or anything of that kind. And it seems to me that if religion is true at all it is the one thing to live for, and that it ought to be made one's whole life. Or else let us disbelieve it entirely, as papa does."

Miss Lascelles gave a little shudder.

"Dear child, you don't know what pain it is to

me to hear such an awful alternative from those young lips, which should repeat only prayers and praises! Do not say such a thing again. Do you know what it means?"

"No," said Virginia, a little scared.

"It means that you place before you the alternative of worshipping God or the Devil." She made the sign of the cross as she spoke, and rapidly repeated the Lord's Prayer.

"Papa says there is no devil," said Virginia. "He says it was an invention of the Jewish priests to frighten the people, and borrowed from them by the Christians."

"Pray to God, my child, that he does not find it to have a reality," said Miss Lascelles solemnly. "But I do not care to discuss your father's religious opinions—or rather want of them—with you. My object is to save your soul, not condemn his. Yours must be saved, and now it is—lost!"

Virginia shuddered and turned pale.

"I feel lost," she said in a low voice.

Miss Lascelles bent over her with a tender smile—the smile of a mother to her grieving child.

"All will come right, dear one," she half whispered. "God is even now calling you. He has sent me to be

your salvation. But first—do not call me Miss Lascelles; call me Sister Agnes."

"That would be a liberty," said Virginia, blushing gravely.

"No, that is my name in the Church and by which our dear Mother Mary knows me. Saint Agnes is my patron saint, and I do her work, and obey her wish when I call myself by her name."

"Her wish?—do you believe in the saints?" cried Virginia with irrepressible surprise.

The Sister smiled.

"Do I believe in the sun and moon and stars?" she said. "Of course I do! The dear saints and our blessed Mother Mary are half the good influence of religion, half the foundation of the Church."

"If I could but believe in the saints!" cried Virginia. "But papa says that it was part imposture and part disease; and I have never dared to let myself believe in the things that I have read of them. How I wish I could!—and how I wish I could feel as they felt!"

"Child, I must make this stipulation with you—do not bring your father's authority between us. He is a good man, I have no doubt; but he has trusted to his own strength, and God has abandoned him and given

him over to destruction. I will believe that it is only for a time; but for this time, to quote him, when I am teaching you, is like one of your own rustics objecting to be taught how to spell properly, because his father has always written heaven with two v's. What a joy it will be for you, darling child, if you are made the blessed instrument of bringing him to the light of God's knowledge!"

Miss Lascelles spoke earnestly, but with perfect temper, when she mentioned this obnoxious father. He was horrible, dangerous, devilish; but she wished to convey the impression of a fine Christian liberality which could find room for even such a sinner as he.

"Ah!" said Virginia, raising her face with a certain rapt look like sunlight stealing over it. Then it clouded. "But I must first be enlightened myself," she said sorrowfully, the tears starting.

Miss Lascelles kissed her forehead.

"Good, dear child! Now I have your soul," she said fervently; "now I know that my saint has heard my prayer, that the Blessed Mother will be gracious, and that you are to be counted among the beloved and the saved. You are one of the lambs to whose salvation I am consecrated, and through God's grace and with the

help of my dear saint and the Blessed Mother, I shall be permitted to save you!"

Silently, quietly, but with a strangely abrupt motion, she knelt by the girl's side.

"Kneel with me," she said softly; and Virginia knelt, not abashed, not confused, not uncertain, as would have been natural to her an hour ago, but rapt and overcome, part in pain and part in ecstasy. Had she then at last found that home for which her soul had been seeking? and should she be admitted, if indeed this were that home?

Sister Agnes made a prayer. It was short but fervent, and was addressed to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, beseeching her for her special grace to this lost child who was seeking her and whom now she brought to her beloved feet. Then there was an invocation to Saint Agnes, reminding her that she was the special patroness of young girls, and how this girl above all needed her care and protection. When it was over she kissed Virginia again on the forehead; her eyes bright with tears. Virginia's were overflowing.

"This is the first act of your consecration, my child," she said softly. "Ah, how good the dear Mother has

'Now, I want you to wear this for my sake and theirs.'

been to me to give me this blessed work as my first fruits in a strange land!"

"How good you are!" murmured Virginia, leaning against her bosom while she threw her arms round the Sister's waist. She felt more mothered on that breast than she had ever felt before.

"No, Saint Agnes is good, the Blessed Mother is good, and our dear Lord and our Father. It is they who have given you to me. I am only their instrument. Through me you hear them. Now I want you to wear this for my sake and theirs, to remind you that They have called you and that you have promised to obey. Wear it under your dress, and keep it as a secret between Heaven and you. Your spiritual mother gives it to you."

She took off from her own neck a small silver crucifix which she wore on a slender elastic thread concealed under her collar. She kissed it, made the sign of the cross, and whispered a prayer as she placed it round the girl's throat.

"Never take it off," she said; "wear it as the sign of your first consecration, till my brother or I give you another. And read in these books and pray from them," she added, lifting up her apron and taking from a large pocket in her dress two small books of devotion—one of

prayers, with those to the Virgin and Saint Agnes specially marked, and one of exhortations and obedience to the Church and her ordinances. "We will talk again," she added, as she heard steps through the hall. "Come to me whenever you feel the need of comfort or advice. Remember, I am your spiritual mother, and you are my child whom God has given me."

Then the door opened, and Hermione and the vicar entered.

The mother and daughter did not stay long after this. Both were excited, both moved. Mr. Lascelles had been discussing with Hermione his project for the restoration and embellishment of the church, and had insisted both plainly and strongly on the duty which lay before her of undertaking the chancel at her sole cost. When she hesitated and said that she did not think her husband would consent, he had told her, still with the same plain if so quiet speaking, that she owed a higher duty to God than even to her husband; and that this was for the glory of God, which ranked before servile submission to a professed atheist, let his relations to her be what they would. She must make a stand, should Mr. Fullerton object. The money was really hers, and she would be called to account for its use on that Great Day when a woman's

fears would not save her soul. And even, setting religion side, for the decency of the parish the thing ought to be done; and she, as the lady of the manor and the lay rector, ought to bear her part nobly. She therefore was silent on the way home. Her heart was full of perplexity, and the new and the old were warring together; an aroused conscience and a love, though irritated by no means dead, were jostling each other through the mazes of her tangled thoughts, and she could not find comfort in the meaningless nothings which made up her usual conversation with Virginia. And to the girl herself silence was also necessary; she held that sacred link between Heaven and herself as a holy secret which even her mother must not share; and the cross stood as a barrier between them. At last the girl said, lightly touching her mother's arm:

"Mamma, she is an angel! She is Sister Agnes, not Miss Lascelles, and she says that I am to call her Sister Agnes. She believes in the saints, and all those beautiful stories are true."

Hermione as lightly touched her daughter's hand.

"Gently, gently, dear," she said with a sudden impulse of caution. Between wishing to make the church beautiful in an artistic sense and to see something like a

religious feeling in the place, partly as a good thing for the poor, if also in part as that form of personal excitement which makes a handsome clergyman very precious to a woman nearing forty—between this and believing in the lives of the Romish saints was a wide step. "You must not believe all you hear, nor all at once," she added.

"I believe in that because Sister Agnes says so," answered Virginia, all her soul in her eyes. "And oh, mamma! so will you some day!—and so will papa."

Hermione's face fell.

"Your father will never be brought to believe in God, still less the saints," she returned with an odd kind of sad impatience. "If he will allow me to do as I think right, I can hope for nothing more."

"Oh, papa is so good, so kind, so noble, he must believe in time!" said Virginia fervently. "He wants only to know the truth to follow it."

"He thinks he has the truth now," she answered hopelessly; "and he is too old to be convinced. To him a bit of dead matter is God:—and what can be expected from him—hating the clergy as he does? No, dear, we must look for nothing from your father; but he will probably be just to us and will let us act as I think right for us both."

Virginia touched the place where the small crucifix hung. It was like a talisman to her, potent enough to work the miracle of reclaiming to the Church even one so set in his own way and so convinced of the rightness of his views as was Richard Fullerton, her father, a professed agnostic for his own part, and the ardent teacher of denial and infidelity to others.

CHAPTER V.

THE FIRST TESTIMONY.

"HERE is Ringrove, wife," said Richard some days after that memorable visit, during which time more intercourse had been going on between the Vicarage and his womankind than he knew of or would have liked had he known. "He will stay to luncheon if you ask him."

The young man followed his host into the drawing-room, his handsome face beaming with pleasure. Ever since she was a girl of fourteen, Virginia had been the feminine ideal to his highest self; and for the last two years he knew that he loved her as a man should love the woman whom he longed to make his wife. He was waiting now until she should ripen into love for him in return. She had given no sign that way as yet; but he was always hoping that it would come. Her very reticence and virginal modesty, her quietness of speech and manner, her sweet unconsciousness of self or sense, her absolute freedom from all kinds of girlish vanity—those very qualities which made her cold to him as to all other

men, and indifferent as yet to his love, attracted him more powerfully than would the most beautiful woman's most voluptuous, most enticing charms. Not that he would have been insensible to these last. He was young and an Englishman, and by no means an anchorite; but he would not have made even Aspasia his wife. He must be the first, last, and only one to the woman whom he should marry; the magician armed by love to awaken the sleeping and give form to the formless; and the honourable name confided to the keeping of another, he must feel assured would be held as sacred as the life of her child is sacred to a mother, or the holiest symbol of her faith to a devotee. He was a man to whom purity in a woman was an essential; and he loved Virginia more because she was pure than because she was beautiful. Venus as Anonyma would not have enthralled him, but he would have given his life to be Endymion to Diana.

For all his bright good humour and carelessness of certain conventional forms, Ringrove Hardisty was both proud and arbitrary; and with the possibilities of jealousy if once aroused that made him as potentially formidable as he was now lovable. Like so many of us, he had the double nature of good and evil in almost equal power;

and it would depend greatly on the facts of his life which gained the upper hand.

In things spiritual he was just the average strong man in the full vigour of youth and life, who was content to live honestly and not give himself much trouble about them. He would maintain the Church as it was, because it was English and national and helped to keep the poor in order; but he would have it strictly subordinate to the State, and he had a healthy horror of priestly domination. He had not reasoned the thing out from its elements like Richard Fullerton, but to a certain extent he had accepted the results to which the elder man had come. He stood on the neutral ground of supposing that something in religion was true, but not half so much as was made out; and he supposed that the future would see some modification in the present faith so that it should be brought more into harmony with scientific truths and modern enlightenment. This, however, was not his affair; and meanwhile, his duty as an English landed proprietor was to uphold the existing order of things as socially valuable, and to oppose with equal zeal dissent, fanaticism, clerical encroachment, drunkenness, immorality, and pauperism.

This was where he stood; and on the whole Richard

Fullerton was satisfied with his position—recognizing, as he so often said, the need of crutches for the lame, and that while men and women are mentally so weak as to require the aid of external authority, they had better have it. But he gave his life to make them strong enough to do without it, and he would not have been sorry had Ringrove done the same. He went with him who said that he would rather see England free than sober; and if in pulling down the power of the Church other things were lost beside the superstitions that it held—well, those other things would grow again all the more luxuriantly for the loss of these superstitions, like flowers when the wood is felled.

That with such a nature as this of Ringrove's—strong, wholesome, pure, manly, but entirely without spiritual enthusiasm—Virginia should have much sympathy, seemed by the very necessity of things unlikely, and as matters stood between her and the Vicarage, more so than ever. The only chance in the question had ever been—would his own strong and honest love, his fine moral qualities, the social fitness of things—not to speak of his personal beauty, which perhaps would not weigh much with her—warm her into the life of love? or would her natural disinclination to marriage carry the day over.

all other considerations whatsoever? This was the question which Ringrove had set himself to resolve, though he did not put it in that form. His blunt but no less true thought, was: "I love her, will she ever love me? If she will, I will make her the happiest woman in the world, as I shall be the happiest man."

But he knew no more than Richard Fullerton what was going on at the Vicarage; he no more than the father suspected the strong hold which Sister Agnes had already got over the girl and was daily increasing; or knew of the "consecration" which had claimed her as one of the lambs of the Sister's patron saint, and turned her yet more with her heart towards heaven and her face from the world. As yet everything was concealed; for the time for public profession had not come. When it should, no one would be more bold in confession than Sister Agnes and her child; but meanwhile the best policy was the quietest.

"I hope you do not think me a hungry nuisance, Mrs. Fullerton?" said Ringrove, with his frank laugh and clear carrying voice.

"No; I shall be very glad if you will stay—if you are not too hungry. I cannot undertake to supply you with an ox roasted whole," said Hermione

pleasantly. She liked him, and would have been glad had Virginia liked him too. At one time she had done what she could that way, but lately she had rather forgotten him. "Where have you been?" she asked. "We have seen nothing of you lately. But you have been away, have you not?"

"Yes, I have been in town for the last month," he answered. "It was so hot and stuffy! I was glad to get home again, I assure you."

"I should think so. I should not like London at this time of the year when the country is at its loveliest," said Hermione. "Would you, Virginia?"

Ringrove turned to Virginia sitting pale and quiet at her own special little table, embroidering a strip of white ribbon with coloured silks.

"But you do not care for London at all, do you?" he asked.

"No, I never did," she answered; "I wonder who could!"

"And have you been well and gay since I last saw you?" he asked with that strange awkwardness of a man speaking before others to the woman whom he loves and who does not love him.

"Quite well, thank you," she answered tranquilly.

"Gay!" said Hermione uneasily. "Are we ever gay at Crossholme?"

"What pretty work! What is it for?" he asked, touching the ribbon in her hand.

"Yes, it is very lovely," she answered evasively.

It was a marker for the lectern Bible; but Sister Agnes had told her not to tell its purpose, if she could conceal it without positive falsehood. This doctrine of reserve was one of the girl's greatest trials. If not communicative she was entirely candid; and to evade a question was as difficult to her as to tell a falsehood.

"What are those things?" he asked again.

"Roses," she answered.

"Oh! heraldic fellows."

"Conventionalized," said Virginia, who knew her lesson.

"I like them better when they are more natural," said Ringrove. "These are so stiff, they are not like roses—they are like geometrical figures."

She handled the work as if considering whether she should assent or not, but in reality because she did not want to continue the conversation.

"Why, Lady-bird! I did not know that you could

do anything so smart as that! Show it to me again," cried Richard who was standing at a little distance from the two, looking at them with paternal pride and satisfaction, and feeling sure that in time things would come about as he desired. But only in time. There was no hurry. Virginia was but a child yet; but when the times were ripe he should like this better than any other match that she could make. He knew Ringrove, and could trust him with his darling's happiness. A strong man of character—honour—what more could he want?

Virginia rose, and took her work over to her father reluctantly.

"I have never seen you do such as this before," he said. "What is it for—a pair of braces? If you have no special use for it, give it to me, lassie. I shall prize it as my little girl's first handiwork of the kind."

A look of pain and perplexity came on the girl's transparent face. She loved her father dearly, but if the cross had stood between her and her mother, how much more was it a barrier against him!

"I am afraid I cannot give it you, papa," she said.

"No? Well, make me another like it," he said

tranquilly. "Who is your first favoured—Ringrove?" with a little laugh.

Virginia looked at her mother. Hermione—never quick at an excuse and less apt at subterfuge, at a loss how to direct herself in moments of difficulty and utterly unable to help another—looked down and made no response to the mute appeal. Her daughter must get out of this little tangle by herself: she foresaw thorns enough for both of a sharper kind than this of a promised strip of embroidery.

"No, not Ringrove; it is for Sister Agnes," said Virginia, with the courage of sincere youth.

"And who may Sister Agnes be, my love?" her father asked.

"Miss Lascelles, papa."

"Are you so intimate as that already?" he asked again. "Do you call her by her Christian name and make her presents?"

"Sister Agnes is her real name, and the one that she wants me to call her; and this is a marker for the new lectern Bible," said Virginia.

"Did they ask you to do it?" said her father with a shade of displeasure in his voice.

"Yes, papa," she answered.

"Are you going to belong to their fantastical school? to be made a new light?" he asked with a certain forced merriment that meant uneasiness.

She looked at him with tender reproach. She loved him well; who would not, who knew him?—but though she loved him she was bound by a higher law to think him wrong, and to show him that she did not agree with him.

"I only want to do what is right; and that is all which they want," she answered gravely but gently.

His face took almost a woman's softness as he put out his hand to take hers, so cold and white.

"You are always right, my lassie!" he said tenderly. 'My little one never gave any one any trouble since she was born, and never will!"

"We are all going to be shaken up and put in our places with a vengeance, if all I hear is true," laughed Ringrove, ignorant of danger and the lay of the land within the Abbey walls.

Hermione flushed with displeasure; Virginia looked down, and her pale face became rather paler than usual. It was as if a man of sin had touched the ark of the anointed with the one; and the other resented the presumption of this mere youth who dared to laugh at the

doings of one who seemed to her the most notable, the most splendid man she had ever seen.

"Mr. Lascelles hopes to do much good in the parish," said Hermione coldly. "Things have been so disgracefully neglected in Mr. Aston's time; it is only right that they should be put in order now."

"Yes, if he does not go too far," said Ringrove carelessly. "I do not think that Crossholme will bear very much, and these ritualistic fellows go to such extremes!"

"Please not to speak of Mr. Lascelles with disrespect in this house," said Hermione. "He and his sister are not people to be laughed at."

Virginia raised her blue eyes, full of gratitude, to her mother. How glad she was that she spoke so openly! It would have been impossible for her to have defended them; but mamma was able in every way; and how well she took their part!

"Do you know them, Ringrove?" then asked Hermione, holding her head a little stiffly.

"Not yet. I have seen them, but I do not think that I shall care to know much of them at any time. I am not in their line, and they are not in mine."

He spoke quite good-humouredly, but without min-

cing the matter. At all hazards, he too must stand faithful to his side.

"Then how can you judge of them, if you do not know them?" She spoke with a severity rare in her at any time—though less rare of late than it used to be; but still unusual. "Is it fair to prejudge people in this manner? I am tired of all this illiberality! One would think that a sincere Christian were really a monster, and a clergyman who wished to do his duty a criminal, for all that has been said of Mr. Lascelles since he took the parish."

Ringrove looked at her for the moment aghast. She spoke with so much warmth and bitterness, it scarcely seemed to be Mrs. Fullerton speaking at all.

"These ritualistic parsons have some kind of spell over women," said Richard, turning to Ringrove, half smiling and half disturbed. "Here are my wife and little girl bewitched at sight!"

"I am sorry for it," said Ringrove gravely. "I do not think the clerical influence, carried too far over women, a wholesome one."

"It is not being bewitched to see how good and faithful Sister Agnes is, papa," said Virginia, touching the crucifix beneath her dress as she spoke, and

gathering courage from the contact. "If you knew her as we do, you would see for yourself how good and noble she is!"

"And it is not being bewitched to see that things are disgracefully neglected, or that they might be improved," added Hermione coldly.

"But improved, how? With what will prove to be a rod of iron," said Ringrove.

"What rubbish, Ringrove! How can you talk such nonsense?" she said tartly. "In common fairness and good feeling it seems to me that all you who hate the Church and religion might wait till Mr. Lascelles has done something outrageous before you condemn him as you do. As far as he has gone yet, he has proposed what every one in the world must agree to; he has wanted nothing extreme."

"Well, here is Jones, and luncheon is ready," returned her husband, as the man-servant came into the room. "Do not let us discuss these new-comers further. I confess it somewhat amazes me to see the readiness with which you have given in to them; but you are your own mistress, dear, and you will come all right."

"Thank you," said Hermione disagreeably, as she

took Ringrove's arm, the father holding Virginia's hand while they crossed the hall into the dining-room.

The luncheon was dull and heavy. Ringrove did his best to bring a lighter spirit into them all; but he had gone too far on the wrong track to be able to set himself right; and he felt that he had hurt his cause both with Hermione and Virginia herself more than he should be able easily to heal. Hermione was irritable and uncomfortable, especially to her husband, whose temper she seemed to do her best to ruffle; looking at him with eyes full of provocation that turned to tenderness which was akin to tears, and these again quenched themselves in anger. Virginia was pre-occupied and Richard was troubled, but in spite of her advocacy and in spite of her temper, less for his wife than his daughter. That good Hermione was fixed as a rock, he thought—settled in loving obedience to him, in oneness of heart, in perfectness of marriage. He had but to exert his authority and he would be obeyed—as he would if things went too far. But Virginia was young; plastic; her character was still to make; and he dreaded this new influence more for her than for her mother. He had not the hold on her that he had on that mother;—what father has? and she might be warped, his child though

she was. He must speak to his wife. He must remind her that she was the natural guardian of their darling's discretion, and that religious enthusiasm carried to excess and Church devotion to zealotry were not discreet in his daughter. He imposed no authority on any one. His method was to convince by reason, not to forbid or command; still something was due to him as the head of the house, and it was scarcely fitting that his child, still educable, should be trained in a manner so directly opposed to his views.

Wherefore, the three chief personages being each so full of thought and care, the meal, usually pleasant enough, was silent and dull, and Ringrove felt as if something had come into the house, or had gone out of it, since he was there last.

While lounging in the drawing-room yet a little time before leaving, doing his best to bring back Mrs. Fullerton to her usual smiling graciousness, and to make Virginia's sweet eyes look tender or her grave mouth relax into a smile, as he told now a plaintive story and now a merry one, visitors were announced; and Mrs. Nesbitt and her eldest daughter, the pretty, soft-eyed Beatrice, came in.

They too came partly to discuss the new order

of things beginning in the parish, of which Mrs. Fullerton was openly said to be the chief supporter. And it was such a strange bit of contradiction that the wife and daughter of the confessed infidel of the place should be quoted as the ardent disciples of an advanced ritualist, that Mrs. Nesbitt and Beatrice hesitated to believe it until assured by word of mouth.

The three girls of Crossholme, Virginia, Beatrice Nesbitt, and Theresa Molyneux, were all good friends enough; but Virginia was less intimate perhaps with either than were Beatrice and Theresa with each other. She was more reserved than they, and she did not care so much for the natural pleasures of youth as they; hence they found her a shade cold and unconformable, and she found them a shade frivolous and uninteresting. Still they were intimate enough for Beatrice to be able to say in an under voice:—

"Virginia, dear, it is not true, is it? that you and Mrs. Fullerton have promised to support Mr. Lascelles in everything he wishes? They are saying so everywhere."

"I do not know what that means, Bee," said Virginia. "I can only say that I have made no such vague

promise, because I have not been asked for it; and I am sure mamma has not either."

"Everyone says so," repeated Beatrice.

"People always say a great deal more than they know," said Virginia, unconsciously copying a speech which Sister Agnes had made to her. "Whatever Mr. Lascelles and Sister Agnes have asked us to do we have done, because they have only asked what is good and right; and so I suppose it will be in the future."

"But he is half a Roman Catholic," said Beatrice, opening her big brown eyes. It was as much as if she had said he was half a dragon or a sea serpent.

"He is an Anglican Catholic, which is not quite the same thing," answered Virginia again, repeating her lesson.

"But Miss Lascelles wears a cross, and the dress of a nun," insisted Beatrice, as if she had found the weak spot now, and one which there was no getting over.

"She only wears the dress of her Order; and no Christian can object to a cross, surely, Bee!"

"That is just it. She is of an Order, and we have none in our Church," the other said.

"Yes, we have indeed—a great many—and Sister Agnes belongs to one of them."

"You are so intimate with her as to call her by her

Christian name already!" cried Beatrice, as Richard Fullerton had said before her.

"She is Sister Agnes, just as much as a man is a captain, or you are Beatrice Nesbitt. That is her name," answered Virginia. "When she was in the world she was Miss Lascelles, and now that she has given up the world she is Sister Agnes."

"Well! I cannot understand it at all," said Beatrice, full of perplexity.

"Nor can I," put in Ringrove. "The new vicar and his sister may be charming people on their own account, but I am sorry they ever came here."

"Oh, don't say that, Ringrove!" cried Virginia, carried out of herself. "They are the salvation of the place!"

"I don't think we wanted so much salvation," said irreverent Beatrice, taking Ringrove's part, as she always did.

"Bee! don't!" she answered, really distressed. Then her angel's face became more angelic even than usual, as she said with a kind of concentrated enthusiasm, looking at Beatrice first and then at Ringrove: "You must not say now what you will be sorry for hereafter; you will both come to the truth; and Sister

Agnes will be your spiritual mother, Bee, as she is mine!"

"I don't want any mother but mamma," said Beatrice; "and I do not think that I could let any stranger come between me and mamma."

"A spiritual mother does not interfere with our earthly mother," said Virginia gravely. "My mother is just what she always was, but Sister Agnes has led my soul into the way of truth."

"How dreadful all this is!" thought Beatrice. "She talks cant as if she had been used to it all her life. It is all too true, and she is more lost to us than she ever was."

"You are always so good!" said Ringrove, finding this one of the most difficult moments of his life. "But indeed you must be a little on your guard against too much enthusiasm for those new people. We have to know them first before we can trust them so thoroughly as you and Mrs. Fullerton seem to have done."

"I want no more than I know now," she said. "We do not want to learn more than the sunlight. It shines; and that is enough."

"Poor Ringrove!" thought Beatrice. "It is all over with him!"

She raised her dark soft eyes to him pitifully. She was his confidante, and had heard again and again the whole story of his love for Virginia, and walked every step of the way, now of hope and now of despair, and ever of suspense, that he had trodden for the last two years.

"True for the sun," he answered; "but not for the application. I will wait a little longer before I think our new vicar such a lord of life as this."

"Do," said Virginia in the simplest good faith. "And you will be rewarded."

Mrs. Nesbitt found no more satisfaction in her talk with Hermione than Beatrice had done with Virginia. Her half-apologetic disclaimers—sorry to repeat such foolish talk, but thinking it due to her old friend to tell her what was said—had been met with indignant acceptance. Hermione had defended not only her own adhesion, but the vicar himself, stoutly; had maintained the worth of all that he was doing here at Crossholme, and the crying need there was of more religious life in the parish and more decency and beauty of service in the church. But, as Mrs. Nesbitt said when she repeated the conversation to her husband, it seemed so odd that Mrs. Fullerton of all people in the world should go on so

about religion and all that, when it was her own husband who had done everything he could to make the people as great infidels as himself, and when every one knew that up to now she had never given the subject a thought!

As it was, however, Hermione had reason to a certain extent on her side; and as no unreasonableness of excess had yet appeared and the new vicar wanted only what was just and right, she carried her colours out of the discussion and left Mrs. Nesbitt without an argument, but unconvinced all the same. She used so far her woman's privilege, that, while obliged to assent verbally to all that Hermione said, she kept still that central point untouched which she expressed by: "I cannot argue with you, but I feel that you are wrong."

From this day she could not deny that her friend Mrs. Fullerton was the new vicar's right hand and supporter, and that both she and Virginia had been completely won over. And how Mr. Fullerton would bear it, was now the question beginning to be asked by the community of Crossholme.

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE VICARAGE.

WHAT might be called the personal part of the parochial management of Crossholme went actively forward; but as silently as actively. Working parties at the Vicarage were organized for three afternoons in the week, where Sister Agnes was the clever teacher of all sorts of beautiful embroidery for church purposes, and where sometimes the vicar came in and read while the ladies stitched. He generally read such books as Wiseman's "Fabiola," or Newman's "Apologia;" but always beginning with milder portions of the "Churchman's Manual," teaching them when to bow their heads in the services, and how to stand and kneel, with certain other observances in use among the ritualists. But he was cautious in this and went softly; knowing, as do all his sect, the value of a judicious reserve and the safeguard of silence, and how it is necessary to lay well the lines before drawing in the net, if at times a bold haul is the best and safest policy. There was much to do, and

he had time before him; this was only preparing the way of the future.

Yes, there was indeed much to do before the church services would be made even outwardly decent according to the Lascelles idea; still more before the parish would be as well in hand and as spiritually submissive as it was intended to make it. Altar-cloths—which were always called frontals—of various colours and patterns according to the ecclesiastical season and the special service, had to be embroidered; stoles and copes, also varied; eucharistic emblems and linen for the communion; banners for the processions which had to come;—there was no end to the work in hand, but the true meaning of what they were doing was kept from most of the workers.

Sister Agnes, like the vicar, trusted to the love of women for beautiful things to ensure that amount of diligence which was necessary for the purpose; and to their pride in seeing their own handiwork publicly honoured and admired for their active partisanship should a time of collision with the men arise. What comes from afar and from unknown sources may be dangerous, like clothes that carry the plague; but the roses and lilies and sacred monograms and interlaced

scrollwork which our own Susan and Sukey have embroidered can surely contain no secret spiritual poison; and Susan and Sukey defend their own artistic stitches.

All this the brother and sister understood to perfection; and they knew also that if they told too much prematurely, in all probability their Crossholme Susans and Sukeys would become frightened before their time, and would strike, leaving the work half-done to be finished by strangers. And they had it at heart to make the ladies of the parish commit themselves, first by their co-operation and then by their certain desire to see what they had done utilized and appreciated.

The most constant in attendance and the most useful, each in her own way, were Hermione and Virginia Fullerton, Theresa Molyneux and her Aunt Catherine. The first two were the deftest embroiderers; Aunt Catherine laid the straightest hem and sewed the neatest seam; and Theresa, who had everything to learn, practised her future art on the rougher kinds of material and the simpler patterns, which it would have been a waste of strength to have given to proficients.

Other ladies of the parish also attended, but as they are of no special value to this history, they need not be

particularized. They made up the numerical strength of the society; helped to swell the fast increasing number of female adherents to the new order of things in the way of bowing, position, lowly inclinations, and the like, during the service; and they ensured a certain amount of work accomplished and of animation among the workers. And here their value to us ends. Among them however, was neither Mrs. Nesbitt nor Beatrice. Mr. Nesbitt did not approve of any scheme, how innocent soever in appearance, which might end by giving undue influence to the Church; and, unlike Richard Fullerton, he allowed no exercise of free-will in his family, but ruled his household as he thought best. And above all things he held to the belief that a woman's duty lies at home and a wife's honour in submission to her husband. On her own side, Mrs. Nesbitt felt that she had too much to do for her family to give her strength to ecclesiastical æsthetics; and Beatrice followed her mother in this as in all other things, and assented to the truth of what she said, as if no second reading were possible.

When Sister Agnes proposed that they should join her working parties, Mrs. Nesbitt set the matter at rest then and for ever after by her frank straightforwardness,

which was in no wise offensive—quite the contrary—but also in no wise to be mistaken.

"Why no, thank you, Miss Lascelles," she said; "Mr. Nesbitt would not like my leaving home so often; and Bee and I have really too much to do for the little ones to make it practicable."

"Power comes by the use," Sister Agnes argued with a bland smile; "the time given to the service of God takes nothing away from your family."

"I don't see how that can be," said Mrs. Nesbitt in perfect simplicity of good faith. "You see, there are only eighteen hours of the working day, and if every one of them is filled up, as it is, and as much is done as can be got into the time, I do not see how doing more will make the days longer. I have as much to do now as I can get through, and if I were to undertake new duties, I should simply have to drop some of my old ones."

"Try it," said Sister Agnes with the same bland smile. "Try it, and prove for yourself that the same power which fed the multitudes from a few loaves and fishes can also help you, and that what you give to the Lord is never lost to man."

But Mrs. Nesbitt shook her head.

"I do not believe in present miracles," she said.

"And if I take two hours in the afternoon three times a week for church work, I cannot do for my children what I do now. If I am here, I cannot be there; and if I am embroidering linen I cannot be walking with them or my husband, or doing the same amount of work in the house that I must, to keep things straight—that every woman must, who is her own housekeeper."

"Perhaps you do too much, Mrs. Nesbitt. You are rich, with servants and governesses and all the usual aids and helps to mothers. There can be no need for all this active superintendence, still less for your daughter's assistance."

"I assure you I find that there is," said Mrs. Nesbitt, with undisturbed equanimity. She thought it odd in the vicar's sister to lay down the limits of her domestic activities; but then, clericals are odd and take liberties which no one else would dream of. "And I do not think that any woman whatsoever, with so large a family as mine, can find time for more than her home duties and the social intercourse which must be kept up."

"Like Martha, encumbered with much serving," said Miss Lascelles with half a smile and half a sigh, deftly concealing a well-bred sneer.

"Yes, if you like to say so," answered Mrs. Nesbitt

simply. "But I keep my dear children well and happy. I do not let them get into bad habits for want of my care, nor be made unhappy by others; and I do as my husband wishes. And then you know, Miss Lascelles," she added smiling, "I am of the old-fashioned school, and hold to the value of a wife's obedience to her husband and a mother's superintendence over her children."

"In short, you are as obedient as Mrs. Fullerton."

Sister Agnes spoke so quietly that no one could say whether the words were sarcastic or simply assertive; and Mrs. Nesbitt was not the woman to find out sneers or hints unless very patent.

"I hope so," she answered cheerfully. "I am thankful to say that in Crossholme we have no unhappy marriages and no disobedient wives so far as I know. We are very fortunate in that way, and give no cause for gossip. I do not know one unhappy household—not one!"

"I congratulate you," said Miss Lascelles, a little coldly, "and yet—there is something greater and holier in life than domestic peace."

"No, no; there can be nothing better!" cried Mrs. Nesbitt warmly. "There can be no real goodness where

there is discord at home; and the woman who neglects her own family, that she may give her time and energies to a cause, is doing wrong whatever that cause may be."

"Softly, softly, Mrs. Nesbitt," said Sister Agnes, with her superior smile. "Do you carry your theory of obedience so far as to think it right to deny your God and your Saviour should your husband be an infidel? Is a woman justified in caring only for the physical comfort and happiness of her own children, while letting the wretched poor starve? in ensuring their moral purity while the abandoned thousands all around are claiming Christian care, and the lost souls are crying to be saved? Does your creed go as far as this?"

"No," answered Mrs. Nesbitt quietly; "nor would any woman's. But there is no question of all this here at Crossholme."

"There are degrees even here at Crossholme," said Sister Agnes.

"I do not allow that my joining your working parties belongs to them if there are," she answered.

"So be it," returned the Sister.

And then the conversation dropped. The Nesbitts were not gained; and, on the contrary, a certain feeling of antagonism to the whole thing rose up in the good

staunch loving heart which could never quite forgive the vicar's unmarried sister for speaking slightingly of that which made her own happiness through the sense of love and duty fulfilled, and which she held should make the happiness also of every other good and virtuous woman. Between embroidering silk and linen for the church and seeing that her children were happy and good, she thought no true mother should hesitate for a moment as to where her real duty lay; and no argument that could have been used would have shaken her. When she repeated the conversation to her husband her concluding remark was:

"If poor Miss Lascelles had ever been married she would have thought differently, because she would have known better;" and she pitied her for her ignorance of the best things of life as much as Sister Agnes pitied her for her sensuality disguised as instinct and her practical paganism calling itself conjugal obedience and maternal duty.

All this new occupation, these new interests were making in a sense new creatures of the four chief workers. Aunt Catherine—Miss Molyneux—a good, kindly, weak soul, with more imagination than common sense, and like clay in the hand of a potter who had

clear insight and a strong will, had gone down helplessly before the new vicar and his sister, who had known exactly how to touch her. She had been won over by that St. Catherine, Virgin and Martyr, whose namesake she was, and whose life of mystical ecstasy she was exhorted so fervently to imitate. She might attain to it if she would, they said—if she would strive and obey. And as the steps of her *scala santa* were of no more difficult practice than (for the present) working in coloured silks on linen and satin, bending at certain parts of the service where she had not been used to bend before, attending Early Celebration, and going to church on Wednesday and Friday mornings, she was by no means disinclined to take the sainted Alexandrian as her model in obedience and belief, and to dream that perhaps some of the same grace might be shown to her as was vouchsafed to her antitype.

She might therefore be counted on as a sure adherent to the ritualist party. Her imagination had been fired, and so indeed had her vanity—or what shall we call that need in women of a certain age to renew in fancy the dead facts of the past?—the need which makes some of them go into spiritualism, when at least the spirits who come about them do not regard their

wrinkles or grey hairs?—which makes others find in religion as much excitement as they once did in love, and with some, not very different in kind?

Theresa, a slender delicate hysterical girl of about twenty-two, had also been won over as quickly as her aunt. Her life, which hitherto had been spasmodic and fragmentary, for the first time found concentration and direction. She had wandered about in thought a good deal. At one time she had been an ardent patriot, emulous of such fame as that which hung about the maid of Saragossa—the apologist of Charlotte Corday, and the worshipper of Joan of Arc; at another she had wanted to make herself a hospital nurse that she might go out and nurse such wounded soldiers as the peace of Europe required for its victims. Now she made a night school for ploughboys, but after a fortnight she broke it up; they were too hopelessly stupid, she said, and their hands were so dirty! Then she took to visiting the sick poor, but the cottages were close and she always managed to stumble on inappropriate chapters. She was full of enthusiasm and activity, as yet wasted; and now—it was utilized.

But Theresa was not one of Sister Agnes's lambs. She left that to Virginia, who was as devoted to her spiritual

mother as if she had been indeed the saint who was her shadowy patroness. Theresa carried her enthusiasm to the vicar—straight to head-quarters—and thought that if the world could but be ruled by such kings of men as he, there would be no more doubt or sorrow—at least for women. He was to her a clerical God; but it would have seemed to her almost blasphemy had any one desired to be the Semele to his divinity. So at least she thought; and for the present her thoughts were true.

Virginia was perhaps the happiest of the whole group. She was devoted to Sister Agnes, who, all things considered, treated her tenderly, and led her quietly along the devotional path designed for her. Of late however, she had begun to impose small penances for omissions of duty which she got the girl to confess to her as a spiritual lamb to her spiritual shepherdess, in preparation for the more important confessions to be made in due form to a director. Thus, she would forbid her to sit in her accustomed seat near herself, and would send her over to where Catherine Molyneux was turning her hems and maundering about her patron saint and the Divine marriage as she worked. And this was about the severest task that could be set the poor girl.

For to Virginia, grave, still, shy, the babble and gush of this silly creature were distressing beyond words; and only her loving loyalty for her spiritual mother enabled her to perform a task which was indeed so essentially a penance. But it was difficult to find any punishment for Virginia. It was part of Sister Agnes's management that the lambs should be every now and then gently chastised; and as no one is in want of an excuse when he wishes to flog for error, cause for that chastisement had hitherto been always forthcoming. But this, so easy with others, was difficult with Virginia. She was so gentle, so obedient, so entirely in earnest and so lovingly desirous to do as the Sister wished, that it was hard to find the flaw, even in the exaggeration of confession; and harder still to punish it when found. She had no senses to subdue and no vanities to chasten; but the Sister knotted out of her very virtues the cord that was to be her discipline, and though the strokes were gentle, they were effectual for their purpose—the still more complete establishment of her spiritual supremacy, and the still more complete subjugation of Virginia's will.

On her side Hermione, although occupied and interested more than she had ever been, was restless and

uncertain; her temper, once so placid, was breaking daily; she was tart and snappish to her husband as she had never been before, and then again hysterically loving;—he to the one opposing his unruffled sweetness which she called indifference—meeting the other with his calm serene devotion which made hysterics unnecessary, and which she also took as indifference. Thus, either way she was thrown back on herself, and whatever he was she wished that he had been different. She was variable with Virginia:—now forbidding her to go into the excesses which she said she saw were at hand—now herself taking her to the Vicarage out of the ordinary course of things. The vague disquiet which had once been gentle was still as vague but becoming less restrained; and once or twice she wept bitterly where formerly tears had only gathered in her eyes but had not overflowed. Life was busier with her now than formerly, yet it was blanker. Her husband seemed to have drawn farther and farther from her: and it was as if every effort that she made to reclaim him only separated them more. She did not recognize that she had gone from him, not he from her, and that what she needed for her happiness was trust, not effort. She was beginning to hate actively the pursuits to which she had

never given ardent favour and to feel them out of place in *her* husband. Mr. Lascelles spoke to her so continually of the iniquity of free-thought, and the futility as well as the presumption of modern science, that it was not to be wondered at if she grew into less tolerance where she had never felt sympathy or admiration. And as he spoke also as continually of the duty which she owed to herself, the truth, and the parish, because of her position, she, who had never been anything but the loving wife glad to live in her husband's supremacy, began now to feel that she had done foolishly in her sacrifice of power, and that he had acted ungenerously in his acceptance of that which she had forced on him; and that Mr. Lascelles was her best friend—the only one who recognized her worth and wished to see her in her right place.

Cuthbert Molyneux was sometimes allowed to attend these working parties, and given the office of reader, or as Sister Agnes used to call him the lector—when the vicar was unavoidably absent. He was the only "man-body" admitted to the coterie; but then he was such a poor creature and so little like an ordinary man that he scarcely counted. Tall and thin and reedy, with a small head and narrow sloping shoulders, long thin hands and

a conscience that was always awake while his reasoning faculties were deliberately placed below "feeling," "conviction," "realization," "faith," he was one of the born believers of the national creed whatever it might have been—a subordinate priest, governed by his more intellectual superiors and doing their will with the unquestioning fidelity of a slave. He was a very woman in this—in that he felt the need of a director or a superior; and he, like the women of whom we have spoken, had found what he wanted in Mr. Lascelles—Father Lascelles as he once or twice called himself to the young men, as if in joke, though he said that his favourite title was Superior—the Superior of the little band which though not conventual had some of the qualities of a community apart; and it was just these qualities which he intended to enlarge and consolidate when the days were ripe.

For the rest the meetings were pleasant enough taken as mere social gatherings; and neither the vicar nor his sister wished them to be other than genial and interesting. Their line was not gloom, though it was discipline; and when they fished for souls the bait was bright if the hook was sharp. Sister Agnes knew how to make herself agreeable to each in turn, as a clever well-bred

woman always does. She talked domesticities with the wives, and advised them on the management of their babies and the conduct of their servants. She tried neat little personal arrangements of their hair and dress with the girls, taking them to her own room and showing them practically how much better they looked with simple braids and without fringes or fluffs; how bright colours warred with their complexions, and how far superior greys and neutral tints were to every other. She allowed light blue as the Virgin's token; but no other positive colour at all. She wished to bring her own special band into a certain conformity of simplicity which should show them marked with the same sign even to outsiders; and she intended that next Lent they should all, at her suggestion, wear black;—and she would have gained enough influence over them by then, she thought, to make them obedient to her will;—the thing was worth trying for.

To Virginia she was, even when the giver of penance, secretly the tender mother, the holy guide; and made the girl feel that she was her favourite lamb in all the flock; the nearest and the dearest, and dear to Saint Agnes and the Blessed Mother also. Day by day Virginia's submission increased and her love grew—a

love which associated Sister Agnes with the angels, and made her feel that in obeying her she was obeying Christ—in loving her she was loving God.

With Aunt Catherine, Miss Lascelles was as a sister worshipper of sister saints—the two standing hand in hand in heaven as they the devotees stood at times on earth. Sister Agnes made a little sketch of Saint Catherine, with the Divine Heart and her marriage ring—Saint Agnes, with her lamb. They were floating on pink clouds, embracing each other like two Christian Graces; and when she gave her the sketch, the Sister placed Aunt Catherine and herself in the same positions, saying:

"See, we are now just as our patron saints are in heaven."

She knew that this would kindle the fervent imagination of the weak creature whom she had undertaken to bring over to ecclesiastical domination, body and soul, and make her doubly zealous for a Church which gave her a saint as a godmother and a prototype—for the Sister declared with her sweet smile and in her softest voice that Miss Molyneux when she was young must have been very like the pictures of Saint Catherine. And she was not disappointed; spiritual vanity is as true a fact in human nature as personal pride, and people like to feel that

they have guardian angels and patron saints who give themselves a host of trouble in protecting from physical dangers and listening to the prayers of miserable sinners of no more value to the universe than so many tadpoles in the water or harvest mice among the corn. The position was too pleasant for Aunt Catherine to abandon it; and one of the happiest strokes in a game made up of happy strokes was that which fitted Catherine Molyneux with her patron saint, as well as gave her nephew Cuthbert his, and offered the mystic Spaniard as the exemplar and guide of her namesake Theresa.

Mr. Lascelles too did his part, and he did it well. He let no one feel neglected, but he made each lady believe herself his special charge. To Hermione he was all things—gallant as a man of the world would naturally be to a pretty woman; respectful, as in some sense an official inferior—for had she not the great tithes as lay rector where he was only the humble vicar?—fatherly and reassuring as the spiritual guide leading her from darkness to light, and from the famine of ignorance to the rich pastures of grace. To Theresa he was quite as assiduous and even a little more paternal in the way of a certain secret familiarity, as if the tall, thin girl of twenty-two had been a child not half that age. He

made her feel that of all the souls to be saved in Crossholme hers was the most precious to him and heaven, and the one for which he gave himself most concern. He saw her power of passionate self-surrender; and he traded on it for the good of the Church, if also as a "student of human nature" for the sake of psychological vivisection. And as Theresa was a girl not to be directly influenced by women, but only to yield obedience to a clever man who knew how to mould her, it would have been of no use to have turned her over like Virginia, to the special care of Sister Agnes. Of herself the Sister would have had no influence; only as the sister of the sacred vicar. Of warm imagination and an hysterical temperament, Theresa must always have some admixture of human love to keep her steady to the point, and these attentions of Mr. Lascelles supplied just what she wanted. It was perhaps a dangerous experiment, seeing what she was; but he had been successful in the like before now, and why not again?

As for all the rest he was grave to some, bright to others, bland with all. He laid himself out to make those Vicarage parties as pleasant as if they had been so many fashionable *soirées*: and he succeeded. There was not a woman who belonged to them who did not look

forward to them with enthusiasm, and not one who was not more than half in love with the handsome, well-bred, well-mannered vicar. But he, to do him justice, had but one thought and one aim—how to advance the interests of the Church : and to his way of thinking every method was lawful that should attain that end. It was not his fault, he thought, if women were sentimental, weak, and silly; but it was his duty to utilize their very follies for the strengthening of the Church and the advancement of religion : and if in the process his humanity became dearer to them than even his doctrine, that was their folly as it would be their punishment. He had power enough over his own passions to keep himself free from all trammels—and he never denied how far better he held celibacy for the clergy than matrimony. But he never said openly that he himself would not marry. Only, in speaking generally, he said it was better. Still, other High Church clergymen have said the same thing before now;—but the hour has come, and the woman ; and might it not now again here in Crossholme?

CHAPTER VII.

THE THIN END.

SELDOM twenty-four hours passed without some intercourse between the vicar or his sister with Hermione or Virginia. If no Church work was going on at the Vicarage—of which by the way they were the main support—there was sure to be some question of importance which could only be solved at the Abbey; and as, after that first afternoon, Richard never appeared, the spiritual excitement which had to be kept up at fever-heat suffered nothing by his interposition. Day by day Hermione's religious convictions increased and the vicar's influence grew; and day by day she was more discontented with her husband and more variable in her feelings:—now petulant, repelling, fault-finding—now tearful, clinging, hysterical; but always dissatisfied both with herself and him, whatever her mood or his response. If he were good-tempered and patient when she was irritating, he was insulting in his indifference; if he were grave, he was beginning to hate

her:—she saw it and knew it too well!—if he returned her caresses gently, as was his wont, but without the sweet follies of the dear old fervid time, she bored him and he treated her like a child, giving her a kiss for a sugar-plum just to pacify her; if, thinking all this excitement unhealthy, he tried to calm her, she was repulsed as no woman but herself could bear; and it was trying her too far!—for all her love for him there was a point which even he could not, should not, overpass.

The whole armoury of feminine unreasonableness was ransacked for her weapons of self-torture secret and shown; and she knew no kind of peace save when she was with the vicar or Sister Agnes. They seemed to supply the buttress of authority which was wanting to her own conscience. Her conscience indeed, as taught by them, was satisfied as things were; but her womanly feeling went against her new convictions; and between the two peace and happiness were lost, while feverish excitement and unrest remained. And yet—she could not call herself unhappy. That feverish unrest in which she lived was in some sort the kind of life she loved. If only there had been no haunting shadow in the background!—no vague sentiment of

present wrong and future remorse—if only she could make her husband as bad as she wished to believe him! But he was always so sweet and calm and reasonable, that she could find no weak spot in his armour anywhere. Even after she had tried him most with her temper she found him just the same as ever when she came back, and as little likely to resent her petulance as he was to reply to her provocations. She would have preferred that he should have done both. His calmness irritated her at times almost past bearing. And she wanted a cause against him. Like all people who are discontented with their conditions, she wished to justify her dissatisfaction by some potent fact of wrong-doing or ill-usage; but she searched for her justification in vain.

One day, the vicar came to the Abbey full of a new project for which he wanted money. That section of the Church to which he belonged always are wanting money, and make no scruple in asking for it. It is for the Church, working through, if for, the needs of man, and why should they not?

The vicar's special object to-day was twofold—on one side a thing to be done; on the other a root to be struck and a hold to be gained. The Order of

the Mother of Dolours to which his sister belonged, from "Penitents" had extended its work to invalids, and now wanted a Home in the country where it could send its convalescents. And as all kinds of work and organization tell for the establishment of ecclesiastical influence, the vicar was glad to have the Home here at Crossholme. When minds are enfeebled by sickness and hearts softened for gratitude, impressions can be made which, once made, may perhaps be rendered permanent; and Mr. Lascelles had found before now the wisdom of the rule which subdues the mind by ministering to the body. This Convalescent Home would be a tower of strength to him here at Crossholme; and who can object to a work of pure charity and benevolence? But he wanted money for it; and Hermione must give it.

"I should be glad if you would help me," he said, after he had detailed his plan. "The Knoll, up there at the head of Squire's Lane, is exactly what we want—a fine healthy but sheltered situation, where the poor creatures will have all the sun but be saved from the north and east winds."

"It is the exact place," said Hermione, her kind heart kindling at the project. "The long walk in the

garden is quite like the south of France—so at least Mrs. Parsons used to say when she lived there, and she was fearfully delicate."

"Yes; I see all its capabilities," he answered; "but of course it must be arranged specially for our purpose, and furnished; and the garden must be put somewhat to rights—at present it is a mere patch of weeds; and all this will dip deeper into the funds of the Sisters than they can or ought to afford. Will you lend a helping hand? I am sure you will!"—with his sweetest smile, his best air, claiming her aid by the right of his friendship as well as by the natural instinct of her own character.

"With pleasure; as you know," said Hermione. "I will ask my husband for the money; he never refuses me."

"May I speak to you frankly on a very delicate subject, Mrs. Fullerton?" said the vicar suddenly. "I have no right to interfere in your private arrangements—believe me I feel that—keenly." He sighed, and his sigh made Richard Fullerton's wife quiver. It meant —What? "Nevertheless I feel that you *are* in a sense my own," he went on to say with a sudden eagerness. "You are—my spiritual child and I am your ghostly father," he added in a different voice and manner, as

Hermione blushed and turned her large blue half-frightened eyes from his face to the floor; "and I feel responsible myself for your soul's health."

"Yes," said Hermione, catching his tone. The Child and her Father pleased her; she was to blame to have been startled.

"This scheme proposed by the Sisters of the Mother of Dolours—in which you are to help—must pass as their own. You are not to appear as having helped. We do not publish all and everything to the world; and we are content to labour for Christ and His Church without the reward of man's applause. We give to our Orders the glory which they give to God."

"I see," said Hermione with an earnest face. "It is beautiful—true—holy!" she murmured to herself.

"I like your range of epithets," said Mr. Lascelles with gentleness. "It is the true course for all souls to take! But to go back to our theme. You must not ask your husband for funds for our Convalescent Home. It must be established here as by our Order, with my sister as the Superintendent and me as the Chaplain. You must give to the Church in secret what you wish to give at all. How can you

do that when you have no private fund whence to draw these gifts to the Lord?"

"What can I do?" said Hermione distressed. "I have never had the control of my own money. As you know, when I married I gave it all up to my husband, and there has never been the smallest difficulty between us on this matter."

"Nor must there be now," he answered. "And to keep your domestic peace unbroken you must avoid, what else, with Mr. Fullerton's disastrous views, will become a serious cause of dissension between you—namely, your noble aid given to our church work—by having your own private income with which he shall have nothing to do, and over which he must not have even the right of supervision. I want you to ask your husband to make you an allowance;—no! I will not put it in that way," he added a little warmly. "You must take part of your own money into your own hands—such an amount as will enable you to serve God without praying the permission of one who denies our Lord and is the sworn enemy of His Church."

"But what will my husband think?" said Hermione, looking down in extreme trouble; "though indeed," she

added with perilous frankness, "I feel now that it would have been better if I had kept back some for myself, and not made him so entirely the master."

"You are right; and now is the time to assert yourself. Mr. Fullerton will respect you all the more for your determination," replied Mr. Lascelles, preaching peace where there was no peace. "This arrangement is simply due to yourself as the inheritor of your father and the proprietress of the estate. Wifely obedience is a virtue—granted; no one holds it higher than I do; but this complete effacement, even to the power of doing good, is an offence to God. It is placing the creature before the Creator, and a secondary virtue—a virtue of circumstance—before one that is elemental and integral to your own soul. It must not be, Mrs. Fullerton; you must reclaim your lapsed rights—at least to this point of a private source which you can deal with as your own."

"My husband will do what I wish—I am sure of that," said Hermione as his advocate. "It was my own doing that gave him the supreme control, but I have only to ask for an allowance and I can have it. Of course, it was very silly of me to do this—but I was very young then, and knew nothing of life; and the

idea of managing this large estate frightened me. Perhaps," she added with the finest dash of temper, for this wish for a private fund was not born to-day, and had been growing long enough to have become bitter; "perhaps he might have done this of his own free will. I think indeed that he ought! It would have been better than making me feel that I have to thank him for what is really my own."

"Forgive me for saying so, dear Mrs. Fullerton, but had he been a man of true delicacy, of true generosity, he would have done so. He would not have waited to be asked."

"I think so; but he did not mean it. He has been very very good to me!" said Hermione with the vacillation of feeling that was only too frequent with her now.

"He could scarcely have been anything else," said Mr. Lascelles with his courtly sneer. "The wife who has given him all, could scarcely be other than cherished." Then he added suddenly: "And has your daughter no allowance, such as most young ladies have?"

"No; we have never had the keeping of money; neither she nor I. My husband pays all the large bills

by cheques. We have quarterly accounts, and the question of expense and payment is never discussed. Indeed, I know nothing of our affairs at all. He has the supreme control."

Mr. Lascelles slightly shook his head, and smiled as at the confession of a fault which at this moment was not to be too gravely rebuked. It was a fault; no doubt of that; but he let it pass for the time under protest, and Hermione understood his by-play only too clearly.

"It would be as well to accustom your daughter to the keeping of money and dealing with it of her own free will—under judicious direction," he said. "She is of an age now to learn practically the things of life; and sooner or later she must deal with large sums. Let her begin now. When taking out your own share let me advise you to claim a fitting portion for her. You do not object to my presuming to advise you? In our relative positions it is my duty and my privilege."

"No! no! indeed I do not object! I am so much obliged to you; it is like a new life to me, having a friend who cares for me and wishes to see me righted," cried Hermione. "I think you are very kind to take so much trouble for me."

"Nothing can be a trouble that helps you in a difficult and delicate path," answered the vicar gently. "I know what you have to bear already, and I fear that your burden will become heavier and your way yet more thorny. For such a woman as you, so humble-minded, so sincere, so desirous to learn the truth of God and to follow as the Church directs, to be the wife of a professed atheist!"—He shuddered. "What an awful union of good and evil!" he half whispered, lifting his eyes to heaven.

Tears stood in Hermione's eyes.

"If I could but bring him over!" she sighed, feeling herself at the moment a martyr for truth's sake.

"Yes, if you could!" he answered, echoing her sigh. "And who can say that it may not be? Moses smote the rock and the living waters gushed out, and Divine Grace may break down the pride and blindness in which your husband has encased himself and allow the light of truth to come in. Who would dare to limit God's power or to circumscribe His grace?"

"It would be a miracle if he were changed," she said.

"And such are still wrought; if with such a one as he, seldom," he answered.

Had anyone told her twenty years ago that she would have held such a conversation as this, with a strange man, about that beloved husband of hers—had anyone told her even ten or five years ago, or less, that she should have taken the attitude towards him of now an impatient and now a sorrowful contemner—she would have cried out against that prophecy as an impossible transformation—a miracle that no power in heaven or earth could accomplish in her heart. But it had come; and sitting there with Mr. Lascelles she felt that here was true wisdom as well as her own true friend, and that Richard was blind and dark for the one part and her slightly ungenerous exploiter for the other.

All that day Hermione turned and turned this proposal over in her mind. She was a gentle creature in her inner nature, not one to wish to hurt—even a husband; and she knew that this sudden disturbance of old ways would pain hers. She knew that she was entering on an unacknowledged warfare with the man whom, up to now, she had loved so tenderly, and had only blamed in the secret recesses of her heart because he did not show with sufficient warmth the love which she knew he had for her. She knew too that she was unjust to condemn him for his want of

orthodoxy. She had borne with his agnosticism for the last fifteen years in perfect tranquillity of conscience—her utmost remonstrance having been no more severe than an "Oh Richard!" said with a smile when he was more than usually audacious, more than commonly broad; and to pretend to herself now that she was a martyr because the wife of an infidel, was trading on her own changed feelings with scarce the full measure of honesty towards him. But through all this dim and vague self-communing ran the distinct desire for independence—as much to punish him as to gratify herself. He had not cared to keep her by the perpetual renewal of a lover's courtship, as she should have been kept; and he had lost her, to a certain extent, in consequence. She had escaped like a bird from the hands of one negligent of his prize, and he was to blame if she was miserable. But the only step as yet contemplated for the attainment of this coveted independence was that private allowance on which she had now set her heart—such a mere piece of justice as it was, and so unjust as it was of him not to have done it long ago!—a private allowance which was to be her own, and with which she could deal as she wished, like a sacred bit of soil fenced round against his intrusion,

and which she could consecrate to the Church through Mr. Lascelles.

Meanwhile, pending the demand, she asked Virginia if she too would not like to have an allowance of her own—it would be good for her.

At first the girl said no, she would rather not; but on her mother reminding her that if she had money of her own she could help Sister Agnes in her plans, and that then she need not trouble papa for all that she wanted, she took back her negative and said yes, she should like it; as perhaps it would be better for papa not to know always everything, unless he could be brought to love the work with them.

"But it is not deceiving him, mamma, is it?" she asked anxiously, as the natural honourableness and transparent quality of her character broke through these later spiritual sophistications. "It is only preventing his being vexed and fancying all sorts of things about Sister Agnes and Superior"—this was the vicar in his intimate circles;—Superior of the little band of "Church-workers," as they called themselves;—"things which are not true and which would annoy him? It is not deceiving him, is it?"

"Certainly not," said her mother. "Superior himself

advised it, and would he and Sister Agnes, so good and high-principled as they are, advise anything that was wrong?"

"No," said Virginia warmly. "What they advise *must* be right!"

It was one of the sweetest of our English evenings —a rich warm August evening when the beauty of summer and the wealth of autumn meet in flower and fruit, in the unthinned luxuriance of the foliage and the first washes of gold and crimson over the earlier-changing trees. Dinner was over. It had been more than usually silent, and it was never noisy—for Richard was thinking over his lecture to his men; the monthly lecture due the day after to-morrow—Hermione was considering what she should say and how word her request—and Virginia was lost in a dreaming kind of reverie picturing to herself the peace and blessedness of the conventual life, as she imagined it to be; so that no one found much to say, and no one wished that the others were more communicative. Now they all went into the verandah for coffee; and Hermione's hour for opening fire had come.

How sweet the evening was! Richard looking at

that fair expanse of country, where cornfield, wood and meadow, farm and cottage, and the winding stream that gave life and increased picturesqueness to it all were his—felt a glow at his heart as he thought of the moral influence which such a property gave him. In his own mind it was like a green and living island of truth in the midst of a desert of falsehood; the deep and real fountain of life where all the rest was the mere mirage of things—vapour playing over sand. All this was his; and all this represented the cause of light and knowledge and science against darkness, ignorance, and superstition. While he lived he felt that he was the keeper of an impregnable fortress which would never fall into the hands of the enemy. He and his little band would make headway here, and no one should overcome them; and, man for man, he pitted his influence against the new vicar, and was not afraid of the issue.

But there was that lecture on the Duty of Man as a Member of the Community waiting for him to arrange. He must swallow his coffee and go. The sunset glow tempted him to remain—for it was a singularly beautiful sky, a rarely perfect evening; but he must tear himself away and finish his preparation for one of the

boldest and most outspoken lectures that he had yet delivered.

He turned with a smile to Hermione.

"Well, good-bye for the present, wife. Coming to give me a kiss before I go?" he said, moving in his chair.

Hermione laid her hand on his arm.

"Oh, don't go yet!" she said a little nervously. "Do stay with us a little longer, Richard! You are so seldom with us now, and the evening is so lovely!"

"You think that you are lovelier to me than the evening, you mean?" he laughed.

"By your habits we might both be witches, Virginia and I," she said with a smile. "You avoid us as much as if we were."

"If I am not much with you it is not from want of love, my wife," he said. "But, as you know, my life is full and I can give but little time to pleasure."

"I do not see why your wife and daughter should always be the most neglected." She put on a pretty pout, raising her soft blue eyes from under her brows as she lowered her head. It was a girlish trick revived; or rather it had never wholly died.

"Do I neglect you?" he asked pleasantly. "You? —the best-loved she in England!"

"Am I? Poor things—if I am, how I pity the rest!"

He laughed. His feeling of their absolute oneness was so strong, so deep, so interwoven with his very life, that in spite of the small disturbing currents which of late had set across that halcyon sea of his faith and trust, he could not choose but accept such a declaration as this as so much womanly play. Besides, though she meant what she said, she spoke as if she did not.

"You pity them for their smaller portion? Well, perhaps you are right. They are to be compassionated," he said.

"No, I do not look at it quite in that light," said Hermione, suddenly grave. "Nor in your secret heart do you. But never mind all this," she went on hurriedly, as he was preparing to protest. "I have a little matter of business that I want to talk to you about. So please attend, and let us be serious."

"All right, wife—what is it?" he asked.

"I want to have a private account of my own at the bank," she said with a plunge.

She was not gifted with the faculty of diplomacy, and with Richard she had always found the directest course the best. He was slow at taking hints and he

was especially a man with whom anyone could be absolutely straightforward. He was not likely to be offended by either frankness or boldness; but crookedness and burrowing were unpalatable to him.

"What do you want with a private account?" he asked after a little pause. The proposal had taken him by surprise; and he did not wish to show how much.

"For many things," she answered.

"But why disturb present arrangements, wife? You spend what you will and I make no objection to paying."

"It would be rather odd if you did, considering all things," said Hermione, remembering what the vicar had said.

He passed his hand over his forehead. What did her allusion mean? What did it all mean? If he had administered the property was it not his duty as the man—the husband—the head of the house? It was their property, for they were one; and he as the man was the holder for their joint benefit. Why did she remind him that legally it had been hers, and that he had once been the recipient not the owner? He never thought for an instant that he was still only the recipient, and not the owner.

"Dear wife," he said, "I scarcely understand you. I cannot see what need you have for a private or separate account. What are you likely to buy that I should object to pay for?—what are you likely to do that you would not care for me to know?"

"It is not pleasant for any woman to have to go to her husband for every farthing that she wants," said Hermione with an injured look and tone.

"And how many years have you taken to find that out?" he asked.

"That is not the question, Richard," she replied, a little less amiably than hitherto. "I have found it out now—surely that is sufficient."

"But why should things be different from what they have been?" he urged. "I feel, perhaps foolishly, that a certain vague cloud of distrust would creep in between us, wife, were you to separate yourself from me even in so small a matter as this;—you and I who have always lived in such unbroken harmony, such devoted love! This must not be, my life! Whatever else may happen to us we must go down to the grave as we have lived through our youth, hand in hand, heart to heart, one in a perfect and flawless life-union."

He leant forward as he spoke, looking into her face

with a certain loving pathos, a certain pleading passion that went to her heart. Oh! why was he not always like this! she thought—why had he become so cold and indifferent to her, and put all other things in life before her and his love for her!

"We have been very happy and will be always," she said falteringly. "We are not going to quarrel, Richard, because I should like to have a little money of my own to do with as I like,"—attempting a smile that somehow failed. "It will be better for everyone, and for Virginia too. I should like her to have an allowance. She must learn the use of money, and she knows no more about it now than a child—than I do!" again forcing a smile.

"You have no need to learn the use of it, dear," he answered. "While I am by your side, have you not always a faithful custodian?"

"Yes, dear, I know; but still—I should like it," said Hermione.

"I cannot understand why." He spoke with the same reluctance that he had shown throughout.

"It is not so very difficult to understand surely!" cried Hermione, piqued at his opposition, which she had not expected would be so tenacious. "I am not

a baby to be managed for; and, after all, papa left me absolute mistress of everything. It is only my own at the worst!"

The next moment she would have given worlds to have re-called her words. The sudden spasm of pain that crossed Richard's face told how deeply she had wounded him; and though she felt bound to obey the vicar's will, which indeed had become her own, she did not wish to pain her husband—unnecessarily.

"It scarcely needed that reminder, dear wife," he said gently, when he could speak naturally and without self-betrayal. "If I have administered your fortune it was because, being the man of the two—the two so perfect a one!—it came more naturally to me to attend to the details of business than it did to you. I have not wished to invade your rights nor to keep back that which is your own. Always remember that, my wife!"

"Asking for an allowance to be placed in the bank in my own name need not distress you so much as it seems it does," said Hermione uneasily in feeling, but playfully in manner. "I never knew you stingy before, Richard! you, who have everything, to grudge poor me this little portion—for shame!"

He shook his head. Her forced playfulness did not

impose on him, nor heal the wound which had been made.

"How much shall I put into the bank for you, wife?" he asked suddenly but quite gently. The suddenness was in the complete and unconditional surrender of all opposition—the gentleness was his natural manner.

"I would like to have two thousand a year," said Hermione also gently.

"Is this to include your milliner and all other personal expenses?" he asked. "I ask you, dear, because the outgoings of our house just match the incomings, and I want to know what this sum taken yearly—you said yearly?—is to include, that I may calculate."

"Yes; I will make it sufficient for myself and Virginia," she answered magnanimously.

"So—good! And you like the idea of an allowance of your own, Ladybird?" he asked playfully; anxious to show that the fact once established was to be no sore between him and them.

"Yes, papa," she said going over to him and kneeling down by his chair lovingly.

"And what will my little girl do with it?" stroking down her long silky shining hair.

"I will try to do good, papa," she answered gravely, lifting up her sweet face, so like an angel's, to him.

"You are always good, my Virginia," he said.

"No, papa; I am only trying to learn the will of God, and to follow it in the least bad way I can," she answered.

His fingers still stroking down her hair, caught in the elastic string round her neck, and the little crucifix was pulled out from its place of concealment.

She took it in her hand reverently.

"This is my sign," she said; and kissed it.

Again that look of pain over his face. The veil was lifted just at the corner, and with bitter anguish he saw the shadow of the truth within.

"Are you sure that all which you take to be good and godly is so in fact, my Virginia?" he said, holding her hand and looking steadfastly in her face.

"Yes, papa," she answered. "The Church is the voice of God on earth—oh papa! papa, if you would but hear it!"

"I hear a better," he said; "the voice of science, and of that true humility and courage which can confess ignorance yet not be disturbed. But tell me, child,

who has got hold of you? Is the new vicar tampering with her, wife?"

"I do not call it tampering," answered Hermione. "Both he and Sister Agnes saw that Virginia needed religious instruction; and they have given it to her—as was indeed their duty in their position."

"I shall be sorry if she is made zealous for orthodoxy," said Richard slowly. "It would be painful to me to have my daughter join hands with the school which I give all my strength to destroy."

"Conscience must be supreme with Virginia as with others," said Hermione. "I cannot forbid her in a matter of this kind. What she thinks to be right that she must do."

"Still, our daughter is but a child; and direction in this case means conviction. It is the direction to which I object."

"And which makes my true life, papa!" said Virginia fervently. "I would rather suffer martyrdom, like any of the early Christians when they were persecuted by the Romans, than give up Sister Agnes and all that she has taught me—all that she is and has been to me."

"Virginia was pining for some kind of religious

conviction," said Hermione. "You do not know her as well as I do. The coming of Mr. Lascelles and his dear sister has been her salvation."

"Oh papa, you do not know how happy I am now!" cried Virginia, clinging to him while still kneeling by his side. "I have wanted so to tell you all! I know now what to believe—I am no longer wandering in the dark—I have found God in the dear dear Mother our Church! I could not go back to that miserable time when I did not know what was false and what was true—when we had no daily services, no right teaching, no earnestness in religion, no guide, no teacher! I would rather die than give up what we have now in dear Superior and Sister Agnes."

"All this is a bewilderment to me," said Richard, looking from his daughter to his wife and not exactly taking in all that she had said. "I feel somewhat in a fog. Have you too, my wife, gone *tête baissée* into the new system like the child?"

"I am older and less enthusiastic perhaps than Virginia," Hermione answered with a certain reserve.

"Still you have gone the same way?" he persisted.

"I do not like to answer you as if I had committed a fault—something to be afraid of," said Hermione a little

stiffly. "I confess to having found immense spiritual comfort from Mr. Lascelles and his dear sister since they came."

"And you wanted this comfort?"

"Yes; sorely."

He was silent for a moment. All these revelations bewildered him.

"I had no idea that you were in want of comfort of any kind," he said slowly. "My belief was that you were perfectly happy—both you and the child—as happy as I myself. If I had known that you were pining for any pleasure—any change—I would have given it to you without remark or remonstrance. I would have preferred any distraction to this."

"It was not pleasure that we wanted, papa," said Virginia; "it was faith—it was God!"

"Things might have been different, Richard, had you not been always so dreadfully occupied," said Hermione half in tears. "You know what kind of life you lead and how entirely you absent yourself from us. If you had cared to keep us more with you, perhaps we should not have been so ready to accept all this new life."

"Don't say that, mamma!" cried Virginia. "It was not for want of excitement or mere occupation—not that

—it was because we were both wandering and now we have found our rest! It was not because we wanted papa—dear as papa is—but the Father whom we have found!"

"If this is true, my wife," returned Richard, not noticing Virginia's more thorough partisanship, more enthusiastic confession, "I would have given up all—all that I most loved and valued—to preserve you from this dreadful blunder—this fatal bewilderment. Oh, why did you not confide in me, my wife? you whom I trusted so entirely, and love so devotedly!"

"After all, Richard, are we not making a great deal too much of—what?" said Hermione, suddenly changing her tone. Virginia's passionate advocacy a little frightened her, and did in a certain measure chill. And then she saw how heart-struck her husband was, and she did not want to hurt him too much; they had once been very happy, and he did not mean to be disagreeable to her. "We have a new clergyman here in the parish, and Virginia and I like to assist in the parish work. This is the whole of the matter from beginning to end; and it is not one that deserves either your pain or our hysterics. Virginia has been greatly taken with Sister Agnes—girls of her age often are with clever women like

that; but we are all making too much of it! Don't look so grave, Richard! I have always been loving and obedient to you," she went on to say, warming with her own words and talking herself into a new mood; "and I always will be, unless"—smiling sweetly—"you want me to do what my conscience disapproves. And I am sure you are too good and liberal for that."

"I want no other assurance than that, wife!" he answered, going over to her as she sat on her low chair opposite. He stood by her and turned up her face with one hand, laying the other on her shoulder. "Let me keep the conviction of your unbroken faith to me, as mine to you, and I can meet the whole world!"

She looked up at him and met his eyes—those dear, mild, honest eyes in which she had once seen all her hope and found all her bliss. Memories of the old days came over her, softening and warming her heart and turning back her love to him as if she had been a girl.

"Richard!" she said impulsively; "if it pains you, dear, I will give up all—even——"

"Mr. Lascelles," said the servant; and the vicar, close at his heels, passed into the verandah like one to whom the house is free.

"I thought I might catch you, Mr. Fullerton, if I

came at this hour," he said blandly, showing neither disappointment nor vexation; though he had not expected to see him, and was annoyed to find him on the ground. "I have just received the Faculty from the Bishop, and should like to consult Mrs. Fullerton—and yourself—on the restorations to be made in the church; and to which she, as the great tithe owner and the chief lady of the place," graciously, "will have much to say. Are you at leisure? May I show my plans?"

"If you wish it," said Richard gravely, feeling that his enemy was in his camp, but holding a flag of truce that meant treachery.

The vicar's evident familiarity with the house, the kindling of Virginia's face when he came in—that dreadful crucifix on her bosom!—and Hermione's flush and embarrassment coming on her request for such a strange alteration in their old relations—all had impressed him; and it seemed to him that his proper place was truly here, as the head of the house watching over its weaker members when danger was by.

But he was too late; the roots had been struck, and the tree had begun to grow;—was it the Tree of Life or the upas?—that which would give salvation or bring destruction?

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WHOLE DUTY OF MAN.

THE most notable of Richard Fullerton's "men" were John Graves the tailor, Tom Moorhead the blacksmith, and George Pearce the carpenter of Crossholme; and, notable in another way, Adam Bell, that clever, reckless, shifty fellow who kept the chandler's shop at the far end of the village.

Apparently, to judge by the ease with which he could talk of methods and handle various sorts of tools, Adam had practised every kind of handicraft not requiring special breadth of shoulder or development of biceps—and some others that needed sharp wits more than deft fingers. No one could make out exactly what he had been, but everyone gave him credit for having been a great many things; and it was even said that he must once have been a play-actor. Certainly no one sang a better comic song, or spouted with more fluency, or gave imitations of the various best known actors with more facility;—there were no experts among the

critics of Crossholme to determine whether the imitations were exact or no ;—they seemed to be so, and that was enough. When in the vein too, he could go through whole parts of wild melodramatic plays, such as are given in barns by strolling companies and at "Richardson's" in fair times—plays full of poison and death and love, and with a large amount of high-falutin' and impossible virtue to balance the as impossible vice. And, as those who discussed him argued, shrewdly enough, it was scarcely likely that he would have taken the trouble to learn just one character and no more in so many pieces—though he knew scraps of the rest—if it had not been for business and his slice of bread. And the shrewd wits had probability on their side.

As Adam was a stranger at Crossholme, coming out of the clouds one murky winter's morning and with no clear track to his last place of residence—conjecture was free to make of him what it would. And conjecture had a fine time of it; for he neither volunteered any precise information about himself in the past, nor gave cause of suspicion by resenting it when asked. He never by any chance mentioned where and what together. The nearest that he said was: "When I was down south I picked up from a yokel an old watch for

two shillings that I sold afterwards for a matter of twenty pound."—"When I travelled the eastern counties I collected some rare old coins of the Roman times."—"Once when I was up in the far north I was lost in a snow-storm."—"When I peddled Cornwall way."

This was the nearest that could be got out of him:—He had peddled: first for a master and then for himself; and now, tired of wandering, he had resolved to cast anchor and make himself a home; and Crossholme fitted him to a hair. But where he was born and where schooled; what he had done when a lad, and who were his father and mother—it being to be supposed that he was not born peddling—no one knew more than he knew what his great-grandfather had been doing this day a hundred and fifty years ago. He had come to the place quite suddenly; opened a chandler's shop much wanted at the time and traded in a very small way at the beginning—but having his character to make, and knowing how it is best made for the long run, he took care to sell good stuff of fair weight and at reasonable prices; and thus, by degrees which were neither slow nor long, he won the confidence and custom of the place and was now doing well. So far things were not in his disfavour; and no one has the

right to imagine spectres which are neither seen nor heard.

Restless in all things, of a prying and excitable kind of intellect, if Adam had curbed his nomadic blood so far as to settle quietly in one house for the last six years, he had not put his brain into harness; and the inventions and discoveries of which he was the father, and which would revolutionize society had he but the money to work them, were as many as there were objects on which he laid his long thin supple fingers. He had invented an electric locomotor, and an automatic printing-press; and he had a torpedo—on paper—which, if put into material, would blow into sky-rockets aught ever laid in the sea; and he had a steam-engine that would pump out a mine in less than half the time of the best in use now—still on paper; a plan how to regulate the boiler so that a blow-up should be a mechanical impossibility: and if he were to be believed, he had the whole re-organization of practical dynamics on that dusty old shelf in the little back parlour behind his shop. Such as he was—talkative but not confidential, bragging but never committing himself to provable statements—he was a character in the place; personally liked by some because amusing and superficially good-

natured, but gravely doubted by the better sort, partly because of that ill-natured insular prejudice of ours which doubts a stranger *quâ* stranger, and partly because of that clever shiftiness of his which gave one the feeling of instability and consequent untrustworthiness. It held off such men as John Graves and George Pearce; and rough Tom Moorhead even more than they. Yet Adam was one of "Mr. Fullerton's men;" and the loudest in his admiration of the doctrines which developed him from a jelly-fish through the common progenitor of himself and an ape, and which denied the personality of the devil or the existence of hell. But though he professed himself to be an enthusiastic disciple of the new school of thought, and a loyal partisan of its expounder here—the master of the Abbey—when with those who really believed in the religion of humanity and the saving grace of science, yet he was not backward in clever parodies and nonsensical exaggerations when with those who had not taken up the thread; and his humour was never so broad as when he was demonstrating to his hearers that they were no better than so many tadpoles, and were just the "gorillas of the future."

He never quite conquered Richard's instinctive dis-

trust of him, as he never quite conquered that of the three men already named. He did his best to get over the master, whose custom at his shop counted for much; but the kind heart was united with a clear brain and an instinctive perception of realities; and though the one part of him hoped all things from all men, the other believed in none short of proof, and gave little heed to protestations that looked well and rang false.

For the rest, John Graves was elderly, quiet, thoughtful, and noted for the pathetic patience, the philosophic dignity with which he had borne the heavy sorrows of an exceptionally sad life. His unbelief was his religion, as it was to Richard himself; and he denied Christianity because he believed in science. Tom Moorhead, a man in the prime of life, was an ardent Radical and the Boanerges of the group; and George Pearce, about thirty, was more after the pattern of John Graves, whose only surviving child he had married, and whose quiet thoughtful temperate nature he took as his own model with the reverent love of a true son.

Tom Moorhead had a daughter too; and people laughed as they noted how often keen-witted, sharp-featured Adam Bell was at the forge when the shop door was shut and every man's servant was now his own

master. But there were few who dared hint to Tom at the possibility of such a suitor as the like of him for pretty Janet. He of all the group most doubted this clever intellectual acrobat, this foretime pedler who had wandered here out of the clouds; and would as soon have thought of marrying his girl to a soldier or a tramp as to Adam Bell of no known antecedents and not of this parish.

But Adam thought that he could work his way in time; with the help of money if all else failed. Every month he was putting by a little matter, which would soon make a tidy sum; and with a good settlement to offer, fathers-in-law are not difficult game for lovers to bag. He had had a good deal of experience in life, he used to say; and he had brought out of this experience one strong settled conviction—that every man has his price and every man his power, if only you can hit on the one and find how best to utilize the other.

Only one thing more need be said at present of these men:—John Graves and George Pearce, his son-in-law, were tenants of the Molyneux family; Tom Moorhead's house and forge belonged to the Abbey estate; but Adam Bell's shop stood on part of the small bit of glebe that had been reserved for the Vicarage. The village was a

long straggling irregular place; the estates were as irregular as it; and odd corners had been bought and sold till it was almost a topographical puzzle to know where Churchlands ended or the Abbey began, or why this little croft should belong to the Vicarage and that half-acre of wood by its side to Monkshall. So however it was; and no one at Crossholme thought it strange or wished that it were otherwise.

More besides these men went to the reading-room, both when Richard gave his monthly lecture—which was of a stronger and more speculative kind than the weekly—and in the evenings and at noon, to read, to play a game at draughts, or to take a hand at "spoiled nines," or "three-card lant." This allowance of card-playing had been made into a nine days' wonder when the rules of the reading-room had first been drawn up; and the neighbourhood had objected to it strongly and canvassed it severely. Indeed it had been raised into a crime by the more rigid; and to hear them talk it would seem that Richard Fullerton had organized his pretty, half Gothic little Institution to become a very sink of iniquity. But as he said, when those who spoke against him and his ways behind his back most unreservedly, approached the subject to his face with greatest discretion:—"I treat men

like men, not like children; and if it pleases them to have a game at cards, why should they not as well as others? I trust to their developing tastes for a higher kind of recreation than gambling; but if they have that desire—many men have; it seems almost instinctive—they had better gratify it in a place where public opinion goes against excess, than in the public-house where they drink till they are inflamed and lost to all self-control."

And as he was the owner and master, and had the right to arrange his own rules, he carried the day, as he intended to do; and the Institution allowed cards, smoking, and beer, as well as giving other things of a higher class. The members numbered about fifty—all the available men in the place indeed—but those spoken of were the principal, and all with whom we have to do in this story.

The lecture to-night was on the duties of men as members of a community. In contradistinction to the theological view of rewards and punishments, of pleasing God and saving our own souls, duty was set forth as self-respect on the one hand and the good of the community at large on the other.

"All is bad or good as it affects the well-being of society, or let us call it humanity," said Richard. "There

can be no intrinsic evil, no positive sin, where there is no community to be harmed by your acts."

He brought forth the old argument of the desert island and how a man could not sin by himself. If he could do no ill to others he could do no ill at all;—spiritual wickedness, self-generated, self-destructive, and offending God only, being a myth and an impossibility. This was naturally utterly opposed to the theological view which makes sin a thing in itself between a man's own soul and God, and in nowise because of its action on the community;—which sees in it primarily an offence against Heaven even when it is a crime against society—damnable because disobedient to divine command rather than to be punished because of its evil handling of man's body and property. "This latter is allowed to be morality if you will," he went on to say; "but the deeper crime, according to theologians, is the spiritual wickedness of disobedience of God's command—not because such command is good for man, but because it is God's." "The only laws that we know," he said, "are those which we are slowly finding out for ourselves in the positive sciences, and that educated and still to be educated sense of justice, equity, and respect for humanity, which we embody in codes and call concretely conscience. It is

childish to talk of a devil who tempts us to do evil—humiliating to common sense and manhood to fear eternal punishment if we have done evil—and what grosser superstition has the world ever seen than the Christian doctrine of God incarnate in man that we might all have a better chance of heaven?—a better chance, mind you; not a certainty—and the whole universe disturbed that we might be less unfairly handicapped! No! no, my friends! man is only a part of the whole—a unit of the sum; and there is no more value in his life than there is in the life of a fly, or an ant, save such as he makes for himself by his higher intelligence. What we have to cultivate is the sense of justice to all, ourselves included; loyalty to the best interests of the community of which we form a part; reverence for humanity at large; love of truth for its own sake irrespective of the conclusions to which it leads us; while ourselves personally, and what advantages us one way or another, is a consideration which comes nowhere in the school of a wise and elevated philosophy. We have to live for humanity, not for our own souls. Never let us forget that. Our duty is here—our work is here; we know nothing but life—can prove nothing but matter—and to waste our strength in vague speculations on things

that are unprovable is the sorriest use to which we can put it."

Was this strong meat given as food to babes, and poison rather than nourishment? Richard did not think so; nor did some of his hearers; if others felt a certain uneasiness, a certain kind of mental droop and collapse at the thought that it was not regarded by a Higher Power whether they did well or ill—just as weak and paralyzed limbs suddenly taken out of irons would fall helpless to the ground. Some felt a certain relief in the idea that if they kept clear of the police here they had nothing to fear hereafter, and were free of the devil who else might have had his word to say to them for fleshly indulgences, or faults of mind and temper which broke no human law and hurt none so that they should cry out; but others again, took the doctrine as it stood, and found it ennobling and heartening. The doctrine of self-respect, and of the duty owing to the community, was one which seemed to them to strike a true chord, and to be a higher phase of thought than that grovelling Eastern personal fear and purely selfish endeavour which are expressed in such phrases as fleeing from the wrath to come and saving your soul alive.

After the lecture was over the usual discussion followed,

when the men spoke out their minds and asked questions or expressed dissent. This was always the most interesting part of the evening, and the most important. The doctrines set forth in the body of the lecture were then more clearly demonstrated and more directly urged.

John Graves was generally of Mr. Fullerton's way of thinking. There was a certain sympathy of nature between the two men which made their minds in unison, and rendered the teaching of the one acceptable to the other. To-night he gave his unqualified assent to all that he had heard. It was not wholly new ground to him, for Mr. Fullerton had gone over it before with him in private, though this was the first public lecture in which he had put forth these doctrines. It was his view of things, he said, put into scholarly language and cleared out. But Tom Moorhead had a word to say against duties to all the members of a community as at present constituted. He would render no tribute to Cæsar because he denied the rights of Cæsar, whether called absolute or constitutional, emperor or queen; and what he denied to the sovereign he was not minded to give the aristocracy. He was hostile to it all, and wished that Mr. Fullerton had touched on that head

in his discourse, and limited the right to demand and the obligation to pay.

Tom always dragged in that shock-headed republicanism of his whenever he had the chance; and when he had not he still made his friends and hearers understand that there was his *bête noire*, standing in the shadow outside the door and waiting for the first opportunity when he could thrust his ugly muzzle into the thick of the fray. He was an impetuous, unreasoning, one-ideaed kind of creature; but he was trusty and honest; and truth, like falsehood, can work with different materials and by various tools.

George Pearce boggled not a little at the doctrine of sin being impossible save such as refers to the well-being of the community. He was a tender-souled young fellow with the possibilities in him of zealotry if set on the track, and he cherished the belief in an inner life which the scalpel could not lay bare nor the spectroscope analyze, nor the crucible reduce to its ultimate essence. "A man is conscious of a certain sort of a something," he said modestly, "that has nought to do with what others may know or not know, nor with what harm may or may not be done to those others in consequence. He could not argue well," he said, "but

conviction and consciousness were facts which everyone could prove for himself."

"A man is convinced of many things which we know do not exist," said Richard. "A spiritualist believes in the materialization of ghosts, and an African in the incantation of his Obi man. Private and personal convictions have ruled the world for a long time now, George, and you see into what a morass of folly and superstition they have landed us."

"These were things, sir; but what I mean is states of feeling—thoughts which only a man's own self knows and can realize."

"Like the ecstasies of nuns, the visions of hermits. You would not put them as solid bases of conduct, would you? Save as physiological facts to be dealt with by medicine they are contemptible; and as philosophical arguments inadmissible. Conscience and consciousness are mental conditions varying according to health and education. They have not even a claim to consideration by their stability or uniformity."

"It makes life a little vague, sir," said George, who was somewhat off the line of the lecturer's meaning.

"No!—Why should it? There is just this difference between us and the orthodox—that we would educate

a man's conscience for his own self-respect and his duties to other men; while the Church says that the welfare of the human family is not the end of life, but rather the cultivation of your own spiritual graces—chiefly humility and faith. We are not without a guide in conscience; but we have the civic and human, not the theological—that which refrains from evil-doing for justice and self-respect, not for fear of consequences. I am not speaking against conscience as a fact, but against the direction given to it by the Church."

"You come down pretty square on the Church, sir!" said Adam Bell. He could never keep silent for long, and he was beginning to consider within himself the value of keeping open a line of retreat. He had a shrewd idea of how things would go presently in the parish, and he thought holding an even balance no bad test of skill.

"Not more strongly than justly," said Richard. "The Church has always been the source of ignorance because its power is founded on pretensions that cannot be proved and which science destroys."

"They make things difficult for plain men like me," returned the chandler. "I have been to the old place these last Sundays to hear what the new vicar has to

say. They are talking of nothing else down town; and it is queer to hear a gentleman like him tell us that we shall all be burnt in flames for ever if we do not think as he bids us, and then to come here and find that there is no place for hell in all creation, and that the Church which pretends to know everything and to teach us all is no better than a nigger pow-wow man."

"What has the Church ever taught that has been of the smallest permanent or real good to man?" said Richard. "Every scientific truth by which society has been revolutionized and man's knowledge of nature and morality enlarged, has won its way after a fight with ecclesiasticism. Astronomy, geology, and now biology have had against them the Church with all its power of persuasion, all its force of negation; and it has only been when further denial was impossible that she has sullenly admitted the new truth and set herself to prove that it told nothing against her omniscience after all! To make it plain that Genesis demonstrates the truth of geology, and that no Christian scientist need trouble himself about the physical cosmogony of the Bible, is now the great endeavour of one section in the Church. I prefer, for my own part, the greater thoroughness

which sneers at science in the interests of Moses and the prophets, and declines to sit on two stools of different heights and strength."

"Like our new vicar," said Adam smartly.

"Yes; he at least is uncompromising," said Richard. "So far we know where we are; for the fight has begun here at Crossholme, though everything looks so fair and smooth. You will be sought to be gained over to the Church by the attractiveness of the services, by the zealousness of the minister, by the tears perhaps—the solicitations certainly—of your wives and daughters who will be won without difficulty; and it will be a hard thing for you to make a stand. But if you go over you will lose the best birthright of your manhood; and the price that you will pay for your reconciliation with falsehood and mental oppression will be your freedom and your intelligence."

He had seldom spoken so strongly; never so directly in personal and local application; and Adam Bell took notes. If there is a chance of the ship going to the bottom, are not the rats wise to swim ashore betimes?

Soon after this the discussion came to an end; and Ringrove Hardisty, having to speak to Richard, entered the reading-room; when the two left and

walked by the side path through the park and so on to the house.

Ringrove had come to consult his elder friend on the advisability of offering himself as the churchwarden chosen by the parish. The election was not far off now; Cuthbert Molyneux was to be the vicar's nominee; and Ringrove wished to be the parochial "sidesman," to match the other in local weight, and surpass him in personal intelligence. The one a gentleman, so must be the other. It would never do to pit against a landed proprietor, and such a thoroughgoing partisan as it was known Cuthbert Molyneux would be—seeing the direction in which he was going—anyone who should not feel himself equal to both him and Mr. Lascelles combined.

"I am glad of that idea of yours, Ringrove," said Richard heartily. "You and I, my boy, must do what we can to stop this new madness, and keep the parish from being overset and destroyed. I am too deeply committed to opposition and denial to be able to be churchwarden at all, in any interest; but you will do all that I would were I in your place, and without rousing the animosities that I should have done."

"I am glad you think it the right thing to do," said Ringrove. "I feel it to be so. I should like to see the Church decently kept up and all that, but I do not want to have Mr. Lascelles or any other priest in the saddle here at Crossholme; and I will do what I can to prevent it. The Church belongs to the English people, not we to the Church; and I will do my part in making the distinction very clear."

"He is working mischief swiftly enough," said Richard; "and I fear that he has touched my child. You know what my hopes have always been, Ringrove, but I have been a little out of heart for the last day or so. I was pained more than I can well say to find a cross round Virginia's neck the night before last. Sister Agnes—as they call Miss Lascelles—has evidently got hold of her; indeed her mother confessed as much; and the child is just at the age when impressions are most easily made—and unfortunately, unhealthy ones even more easily than the healthier. I am troubled about it, Ringrove!"

"Oh! don't be troubled!" said Ringrove boyishly; "she is an angel and will come all right! But just as good and sweet and lovely as she is, are they wretches who would play on her best feelings

and make her as much of a hypocrite as they are themselves."

He spoke with warmth, and naturally with injustice; giving neither Sister Agnes nor Mr. Lascelles credit for the sincerity of faith which was as real with them as their very lives.

"At least she has a thorough-going champion in you, my boy," said Richard smiling.

"And shall have to the end of my life," answered Ringrove fervently.

As he spoke a moving light in the Abbey attracted his attention. It was Virginia walking across her room. She put the candle at a distance and came out on to the balcony that ran round the bay window—standing there, looking at the moon and stars. It was strange how ethereal she looked under the transforming light of the moon. She might have been a spirit or a creature of another race and kind than ordinary gross humanity, for the subtle beauty, the supersensual kind of purity that seemed to inform her whole being. And so simple, so purely unaffected as she was! Here were no æsthetic poses borrowed from pictures and intended to represent saints or goddesses—no artificial ecstasies, nor conscious assumption of rapt reverie.

Apparently it was just an innocent, beautiful, fair-haired girl looking with natural awe and admiration at the starry splendour of the sky; but beyond this was also that unconscious something which touches the imagination of men, and which calls forth their highest feeling towards, and their truest worship of, woman.

"I can understand how men came to worship the Virgin Mary," said Ringrove in a low voice and with a lover's reverence.

"Yes—such as that," the father returned with a certain sense of awe;—she looked so like—what? One who had died and had now re-appeared for a moment, showing herself to sorrowful hearts for their comfort in the old place where she had once been their joy? But no spirits were in Richard Fullerton's universe, and death with him was—death—and no return. And in like manner in his world of faith was no plan of holy angels coming down on earth from heaven—no revelations possible of other spheres, of other lives. He did not know what it was that caught his breath and brought something that felt like tears to his eyes, as he looked at his daughter standing there on the balcony in the bleaching moonlight. He wished that she would speak, or stir!—but when it grew too painful, he himself broke the spell.

"Good-night, my Ladybird!" he called out from below.

"Good-night, dear papa," she said, turning her sweet face downward with a smile that was more sad than merry.

"Good-night, Virginia," said Ringrove Hardisty, his voice not quite so full or cheery as usual—rather hushed and subdued.

"Good-night, Ringrove! sleep well!" she answered him back, her serious face still turned downward.

"Ah!" said Richard with a sigh; "we lose some beauty out of life, my boy, we who go in for plain truth, and matters of fact not fancy. I have never understood the belief of men in angels so well as since Virginia came to me—if I believed in heaven at all I should say, direct from heaven!"

"She is worth a man's dying for!" said Ringrove passionately.

"Yes; or better still, living for," returned her father. "Well! come to breakfast to-morrow, my boy. It is too late to ask you in now—I see the household making its nightly stampede to bed."

"Thanks, yes," he answered, pressing Richard's hand; "you are always so good to me!"

"Well, you see, I look upon you as a kind of son," said his friend pleasantly; "and in any case as the young fellow for whom I have the most respect of all known to me."

CHAPTER IX.

FOR THE SAKE OF CONSISTENCY.

To no one was the new order of things likely to be more unpleasant than to Jacob Ellis, the head-gardener at the Abbey. Hitherto he had had things pretty much his own way; and provided that he supplied the house with timely fruit and vegetables, kept up a good show of plants and flowers for the hall and dwelling-rooms, and took care of the lawn and walks, he was neither required to cut his best blooms nor to account for the grapes or peaches in the margin. But since the new vicar and his sister had come, he had had another family to supply as well as his own, he said grumbling; and, my word! but they must have the best of everything, and what was good enough for his own master's table was not for them! The best of the stuff must all go down to the Vicarage; and if things went on like this, he would give up his place; that he would; and be off hot-foot. He could not stand two masters; and though he thought the worlds of his own, the new-comer was not in his line.

If he had grumbled like this at the things which had been done in the green wood, what were his feelings at those which came to him in the dry, when it was not the question of a dozen of peaches, or a few bunches of grapes done up in a basket of vine-leaves—just what would be enough for two people with a snack over—but of cartloads and barrowfuls, for the decoration of the church at the Harvest Festival?—when the greenhouse was ransacked of every show flower; and the choicest of the fruit taken pell-mell like so many pig potatoes?—when boughs were cut down by wholesale, and the place that knocked about, he said, as would take years to get the better of?

He was sullen enough as Ringrove rode in to breakfast with the master the morning after the lecture, as invited; superintending the loading of a cart with branches of trees, armfuls of ivy, choice flowers and plants, and the best of his wall fruit. Virginia and her mother—the former dressed as for a walk—were at a little distance, standing by the door of the conservatory; Hermione pointing out such and such plants as she wished should be taken to the Vicarage direct, and others that were to go to the church.

No lady in the place was more popular with her

servants than was Hermione. She neither scolded nor interfered with them; was always gracious in manner and kind-hearted in fact; and her housekeeper, catching her tone, made life pleasant for her subordinates and did not pack up unnecessary burdens for them to carry in needless pain. And as for little missy—so they called Virginia among themselves—she was the general property of the household, and the darling of young and old alike. The timid among them only feared that she was too good to live; but while she was alive she was their treasure and their angel. But not even the popularity of the ladies could reconcile Jacob Ellis to the new ordering of things, nor give him patience on the day of parting with his best growths; nor, truth to say, make this sudden invasion of his department in any way acceptable to him. Wherefore, ladies or no ladies, he was sullen out of all likeness to his usual self, and his under-gardener had a hard time of it.

"You are busy this morning, Jacob," said Ringrove, as, seeing Hermione and Virginia by the conservatory, he rode up to where the gardener stood with two men loading the cart with his precious growths.

"Yes, sir," said Jacob shortly, working viciously at his job.

'I'd rather have seen them given to pigs.'

"Where are all these going?" he asked.

"For the Harvest Festival they call it, sir," returned Jacob, still sullen in temper and viciously active in deed. "Have a care, Jim—there's my best gardenia a-standing lopsided; and look out for these Chasselas!"

"The Harvest Festival? where? whose?" asked Ringrove, who had not attended closely to the announcement last Sunday and now had forgotten all about it.

"At the church, sir. It's a sore thing, Mr. Hardisty, to see one's best going down to rot and mildew for a mere child's play like this! I'd rather have seen them given to pigs, I'd go bail I would, than go like this, and never a man the better for it!"

"So!—to the church, are they!" cried Ringrove, who had by this time dismounted. "Faith! they will make a good show; but, as you say, it seems a pity; only I dare say the vicar will take some of them for his own private use, and very likely give the rest away," he added, remembering the old story of Bel and the Dragon and the tell-tale feet, which he had no doubt was as true now as it was then.

And with this he turned away and strode on to the conservatory.

"You are early!" he said to the two as he came up to them. He was a true Englishman in the way in which he usually began a conversation by stating a self-evident fact.

"Yes," said Hermione a little demurely; "I wanted to superintend the things we are sending for the decoration of the church, and Virginia has been there already."

"It will be so lovely, Ringrove!" said Virginia, looking somewhat less ethereal in the morning sunshine than she had done under the moonlight, but always with that far-away kind of look in her angel's face which people have whose lives are more inward than outward, and whose best affections are not here.

"It ought to be pretty with all that you are sending," he said; "and with your taste for arranging," smiling.

"You ought to come, Ringrove," said Hermione.

"Oh! you will!" added Virginia, turning to him and raising her eyes full to his.

"Weekly services are not much in my way," he answered with embarrassment. If Virginia should take it in hand to proselytize him, he felt that denial of her prayer would be the most difficult task ever set him by consistency and principle to learn.

"Not yet, but they will be," returned Virginia, still looking at him with her sweet, frank, pleading eyes.

Had she been the most finished mistress of the art of seduction she could not have touched Ringrove more deeply than now by this loving care for his soul, this pleading with him for what she thought the better thing, though he neither agreed with her nor wished to follow her direction. Still, that she should desire to direct him was in itself happiness unspeakable to the man who was waiting with so much patience for the lighting of that little spark of love which gave no sign as yet of kindling. He made a greater effort over himself than she knew not to yield on the spot. But, in love though he was, he had also some regard for that same consistency which manly men prize so highly; and he did not want to be quoted as one of the vicar's adherents when heart and soul he went the other way.

"We must learn things by degrees," he said with a lover's instinctive hypocrisy. "Meanwhile, what I have come for," turning smiling to Hermione, "is breakfast, if you will give me some. Mr. Fullerton asked me last night."

"He did not tell me—indeed, I have not seen him

since dinner yesterday; but I am glad to see you, Ringrove, as you know," said Hermione graciously.

She was naturally hospitable; and by reason of her husband's studious habits, also not a little because of his objectionable opinions, had only too few opportunities of showing her liking for society.

"You are always the pleasantest and sweetest hostess in the world!" cried Ringrove enthusiastically. He did a great deal of love-making to Virginia through her mother.

She smiled and brightened even more than before, and she was her brightest self this morning. Ringrove had always been a great favourite with her, and until the new order of things in the parish she had given herself no little trouble about him and his affairs, and had done her best to warm her daughter towards him by the frankness of her own liking.

"I think breakfast must be ready now, Virginia—do not you?" she said, turning to the girl whose eyes were roving over the stands, looking if there were not more and more stately plants that might be taken down to the church, for all that Jacob had vowed and protested, half in tears, that he could not spare another stick or leaf, and that he had given too many already.

"Oh, yes; I am sure it is," she answered, looking towards the house.

She was not hungry nor thirsty nor wanting physical comfort in any way; she was satisfied with things as they were, and could have gone all day without more nourishment than that which she drew from her excitement and devotion; but as breakfast was a fact that had to be accepted and got through, she was anxious to have it over that she might go down to the church again. And indeed so was Hermione. To both, the church, the vicar, and his sister were the whole for which they lived —all that made their happiness and their occupation.

They were fairly fascinated; as were others in the place; but if to Virginia it was true spiritual exaltation, wherein human love, strong as it was for Sister Agnes, counted only as the medium not the end, to Hermione it was somewhat different—though she honestly deceived herself and believed that to God was given all, while to man was paid only the rightful tithe which the priest may justly claim. If men like Mr. Lascelles did not allow women to thus deceive themselves, when they do not more actively hoodwink and mislead, their power would not be what it is now. But sex when most ignored is oftentimes most potent; and the priest is no less the

man to his female devotees because he offers himself to them as a saint.

"Well! there is the gong; let us go in," said Hermione. "We have a hard day's work before us, Virginia and I, and we must make haste."

"Good morning, my wife; out so early!—and my Ladybird armed *de cap en pied* before breakfast!" cried Richard, holding out his hand to Ringrove. He met them all in the hall as he came from his study when the gong sounded. "What has called you out so early, my wife?" he asked pleasantly, taking her hand on his arm and looking at her with laughing eyes.

"I have been in the garden," said Hermione.

"So! that is good! You are looking as blooming as a flower in consequence," he answered back with playful malice. Hermione's indolent habits and late hours in the morning—never getting down to breakfast till half-past nine or ten—had always been a little source of half-loving half-earnest discussion between them; and Richard meant to remind as well as to compliment her.

"I never saw Mrs. Fullerton look better," put in Ringrove.

"Are you going to adopt my suggestion at last, wife?—and see the sun rise on occasions?" asked her husband.

"I do not know about adopting your system," she said smiling. "I have been into the garden to-day because obliged."

"Yes? why? What were you doing, dear?"

"Superintending the removal of the plants and flowers for the Harvest Festival to-morrow," she answered, looking into her plate.

"What Harvest Festival?" he asked with surprise; and then, as Ringrove had done, he added: "Whose and where?"

"At the church," she answered, trying to speak with indifference.

"And is that what you have been doing, Ladybird?" he asked of Virginia.

"No, papa. I have been to matins—early morning prayers," she added in answer to her father's look of surprise. "We are going down after breakfast to help in the decorations. To-morrow is our festival, and the church must be decorated to-day."

Both she and her mother had been told by their respective spiritual directors that no concealment was to be attempted with the husband and father concerning the part which they had taken in the autumn festival of the church. He was free to learn so much to-day of how

things stood between them and the church to the destruction of which he had devoted himself; in general, by their advice, he was left in total ignorance of their movements and feelings; lying by the suppression of the truth not counting as a sin where that truth might prove too weak for success in battle.

"But I thought that it was the people who had benefited who gave their thanks," said Richard. "How is it that we, who hold no land in our own hands, and therefore have nothing to do with the harvest, should supply the thank-offerings?"

"It is our duty. We are here to set an example," said Hermione. "And if others will not do as they ought, we must."

"Is not this vicarious?" he asked.

"You may call it what you like," she answered, flushing; "but it is our duty."

"Still, it sounds a little like a cheat—buying a substitute on the one side and supplying it on the other. No argument can make the Abbey fruit and flowers a true thank-offering from those who are assumed to bring their tribute because they have cause for rejoicing," said Richard, with a smile. "This is altruism that goes beyond even me."

"It is gratitude to God and paying honour to the Church, whoever does it," said Hermione a little stiffly.

"And the second clause, my dear, is the dragon which eats up the first. Surely you are not so far touched with superstition, wife, as to imagine that it pleases the great First Cause, the Force which you call God, to have a handful of fruits and flowers hung up in a place called a church because the sun has shone at a favourable moment for certain growths, and a few men have stacked a few measures of wheat in good condition! We are going back to fetishism at lightning speed indeed if these degrading absurdities are to rule our minds and actions."

"Richard! how can you talk so wickedly? It makes my blood run cold to hear you!" cried Hermione with displeasure.

"Because I do not think that the Power which expresses itself by this great universe is to be mollified like an autocratic barbarian with offerings—pleased, like a child, with gifts? Keep to the sway of the church as your argument, if you will. I can understand only too well how the clergy should teach these silly superstitions, and how weak and ignorant folk still believe in them; but do not bring them gravely forward here, where we have no need of subterfuge."

"I bring forward what I believe and am taught," said Hermione.

"You believe that your God is to be propitiated or thanked, or whatever you like to call it, by a few apples and pears, and a bunch or two of corn and hops? Hermione! my wife! what has come to your reasoning faculties?" said Richard.

"What it would be as well if it came to yours, Richard; a little humility and a little faith," she answered tartly.

"If you are humble, dear, what is that which pretends to teach you?" he said. "A body of men declaring themselves infallible—the possessors of eternal and immutable truth, affirming an intimate acquaintance with the secret counsels of God, to use their own phraseology—and the mappers out of heaven and hell as if they had been over both with a measuring tape; and all quarrelling among themselves; and none of them knowing so much as we others of the world around them in which they live. Do you not see that you are being traded on through your very virtues? that your humility is the pabulum of their insolence? your faith bolsters up their presumptuous assertions, and makes their monstrous falsehoods possible?"

"No! and I do not wish to see anything so blasphemous," said Hermione.

"I am sorry for it, wife; there ought never to be the time when we do not wish to see the truth," he answered gravely.

Virginia leant forward and put her hand in her father's. This was the first real dispute that her parents had ever had in her presence, and almost the first that they had ever had at all; and though firm to her own view of right as Sister Agnes had taught her—had she not the little crucifix to tell her how to stand and where to go?—she was distressed all the same.

"Dear papa," she said very quietly; "is it not all in that very word? You think one thing true, and mamma the other, and—and——" she hesitated.

"And my little Ladybird's cool hand comes in between as peacemaker; is that it?" he answered smiling, half ashamed of the heat that had been stirred up in the talk, though he himself had been so far less excited, so far less angry than Hermione. "But has the father no word to say that should be listened to, my lassie?—no authority of guidance? Does this belong only to a stranger? And is he who loves best and sees most to be set aside as one having no voice in things?"

"If you had not set yourself against the Bible and the Church as you have done, you would have been listened to, and things would have been different, Richard," said Hermione. "But what is to be done as things are? You believe in nothing at all except your horrid old bones and senseless bits of jelly; and your opinions are really too shocking for anyone to listen to —and before Ringrove and the child, too! I wonder how you can say such awful things, Richard! If I were in your place I should expect the roof to fall down on me!"

"No, dear; that is just what you would not expect if you were in my place," he said quietly.

"If you were anything of a Christian—anything of a believer—and not such a fearful materialist as you are, I would obey you gladly in all things," Hermione went on to say, not noticing her husband's characteristic little disclaimer. "But while you abuse the Church and the Bible as you do, and deny the very existence of a God, or the life after death, both Virginia and I must disobey you. We cannot help ourselves; and it is your fault, not ours!"

"And the religion which brings strife where there was peace—dissension where there was love—and all

this hysterical and unwholesome excitement where there was calmness, security, rest—that religion seems to you holy and true?" he asked, as much amazed at the fluency as he was at the openness of her opposition. It had never come to this point before.

"Christ said He came to send a sword," said Hermione.

"Are you going to draw it, wife, against me?" he asked, his eyes growing dark and tender.

"You have drawn it yourself," she answered, turning away her head, and in so low a voice that he did not hear what she said.

"Come down to church, papa; come with us to-day to help us with the decorations, and to-morrow to the service!" said Virginia by way of making peace. "You and Ringrove both come!"

Poor Ringrove, who had felt keenly the humiliation of this quarrel—for what else was it?—between the two people in whose perfect union he had believed as in the sun, and who had not known where to look nor what to do during the time that it had been going on, was so pleased, so relieved by this diversion made by Virginia, that he gave in at once—at least to the first part of her plan.

"Yes," he said in his cheerful, pleasant voice; "I shall be very glad to go with you to-day, Virginia, and help you with the decorations."

"Good boy!" cried Hermione impulsively; while Virginia, smiling, radiant, and feeling sure now of this upright, honest, but unenlightened soul, looked up into his face with such gladness, such tenderness in her eyes, that Ringrove felt himself grow as it were dizzy, as if he somehow lost his balance.

"And you too, papa," Virginia urged.

He shook his head, smiling and calm, but grave, and as if not to be stirred even by her sweet prayers.

"Yes, do, Richard!" said Hermione, turning to him with a total change of manner; all her anger gone, her rigidity melted into tenderness, her coldness into yearning, her opposition into beseeching. "You will make me happier than I have ever been in my life, darling, if you will only come with us to-day or to-morrow. Richard, dear, dear husband, do come with me, if only for this once and never again—but for this once! Do, darling!"

She left her place at the table and went over to him, taking one hand in hers while she laid her arm round his neck and bent down to look the better into his face. Not once since Mr. Lascelles had come into the parish,

nor for long before, had she looked like this; not once turned back so thoroughly to the tender lovingness of the old, old days.

"My wife," he said fondly, "for your dear heart I would do much—you know that too well for me to need to say so—but do not ask this. You would not have me a hypocrite? Even to give you pleasure, Hermione, would you have me false to myself?"

"No, no; not a hypocrite," she said. "But come with me to the church to-day or to-morrow."

"I could not unless I were a hypocrite," he said.

"You will not do this little thing for me, Richard? Yes, I am sure you will! Husband darling, do come!"

"Do not ask me, wife; do not look at me like that. Those dear eyes that have been my happiness, my very life—do not look that prayer through them! Ask me for anything else, my darling, but not for this one thing in which my self-respect is bound up—my loyalty to my flag, my loyalty to truth."

"But what a truth!" she said. "And I ask so little of you!" she went on hurriedly; "only to help us to-day. We have the service to-morrow. All I want is that you should come with Virginia and me now, just to see the decorations; only to see them, Richard. You

need not stay; but come with us! You see Ringrove is coming."

"Ringrove acts according to his conscience, so must I according to mine," he answered gently.

"If I could but induce you to come!" she said again, tears starting to her eyes. She raised the hand in hers to her lips and kissed it passionately. "Come with me, Richard!" she cried again; "come with me to church! Oh, if you would only yield!"

Neither he nor she herself knew what dim unspoken fear, what dumb thought inspired the passion, the fever, the yearning with which she spoke. It was all so much the more pain to the heart of the man who loved her, but who had cast his conscience and self-respect on the other side. He had to choose between the two—between Hermione and the truth, love or manhood.

"Blessed, good Hermione!" he said, taking her to him; "I would that you had asked me what I could do! This is not possible, my life; anything but this."

She turned away with a sob, let his hand fall out of hers, and drew herself from his arms. Then, swift as lightning, her mood changed. She looked back at him over her shoulder.

"Never forget," she said in a strange voice, "that I

once prayed you, Richard, to be with me in my new life. Whatever happens, never forget this."

She went back to her place, and a silence, frozen and dead, fell over them all. Ringrove was the first to break it.

"I will do duty for you," he said to Richard awkwardly. "I will go to the church as your representative."

"Thank you," said Richard abstractedly; "take care of my dear ones, and do not let Virginia over-exert herself. My wife will take care of herself for my sake," he said, looking at her tenderly. Hermione did not answer, save to say to Virginia hurriedly :—

"Come, my dear, it is time for us to be going."

"Oh, papa, how I wish you had!" said Virginia, her eyes wet with tears because of his obduracy, as she went up to him to wish him good-bye; while Hermione left the room without speaking to or looking at him; not flouncing, not tragic, nothing but simply cold and as if a death had fallen between them.

When she came down she was flushed and excited, and with a certain reckless kind of air and manner that even the servants noticed as unlike herself. She kept so far terms with appearances as to nod a careless good-bye to her husband, who was standing in the hall waiting to

put her into the carriage, but she did not look at him; she was buttoning her gloves. Her heart was sore against him, feeling as she did that she had asked him to help her in a moment of peril, to shield her against herself, and that he had refused. Now she might go headlong where and how she would. She was free from blame; and on his head be it. But nothing of all this was clear to Richard; nothing indeed was clear anyhow as he sat by the table in his study, his head resting on his hand; neither reading nor noting, neither examining nor testing; too much disturbed for philosophy to help him, too much at sea for science to enlighten him.

CHAPTER X.

THE HARVEST FESTIVAL.

NEVER in Crossholme within the memory of man had there been such a festival as this Harvest Thanksgiving, which Mr. Lascelles had arranged and the ladies of the place had carried out according to his ideas. And never had the old church looked as it looked to-day. It was like a bower of greenery interspersed with fruits and flowers and miniature sheaves of corn and barley, and was true fairyland to the women and children—a seductive illustration, as Mr. Lascelles wished that it should be, of the beauty and pleasure to be found in the way of religion as the Church directs. For religion without the Church was, according to him, only climbing over the wall like so many thieves and robbers; and the Master of the Orchard would give no sacks full of fruit to such bold breakers of the law. If the people wanted material beauty as well as spiritual safety and eternal life they must come to him as the dispenser and interpreter of it all; and to-day was an earnest of, a kind of preface to, the real thing behind.

And truly the old place had been made fair enough to the eye. The dirty whitewash of the finely modelled freestone pillars was hidden by twisted wreaths of laurel and ivy; the reading-desk and pulpit, the pew-tops and altar-rails, the line of the noble Norman arches—all were marked out by borderings of laurel and laurustinus mixed with scarlet berries and snow-white flowers. The altar was like a conservatory, heaped up with pyramids of hothouse fruits and greenhouse plants; and the bare walls of the chancel were covered by a trellis-work of ivy with floral ornaments of crosses and crowns, trefoils, triangles, and doves among the interspaces. A magnificent cross of gardenias on a ground of scarlet geraniums formed the centrepiece. It was Hermione's own work and her special gift; and it had cost Jacob Ellis not a few angry tears and a volley of bad words for the ruthless destruction of his best blooms which it had entailed. It had cost Theresa Molyneux also many tears. She had petitioned so earnestly for this place of honour! She would have spent pounds and pounds for the most splendid flowers that could be bought if the vicar would but have allowed her to be so distinguished; and when he had refused, saying that Mrs. Fullerton had already petitioned and been accepted, she had wept with more

passion and despair than the occasion of itself seemed to warrant. It had been one more lifting of the veil to the man who had already divined what lay within; and though he was sorry to see her suffer, her suffering only confirmed him the more in his intention of asking Hermione to supply this grand central ornament as the public expression of her dutiful affection, instead of allowing Theresa to confess therein her passionate desires. To her, however, he gave the two secondary designs—the three triangles interlaced and the trefoil which flanked the central cross, and which, made as they were of blue salvias, early yellow chrysanthemums and purple dahlias, completed the chord of colour.

Already the walls of the church had been enlivened by boldly illuminated texts which to-day were framed in leaves; and from the capitals of the pillars floated banners of ecclesiastical meaning which helped to give a still richer flood of colour. Lights were on the altar, which it would have been worse than bad manners to have called the communion table as in the old days of darkness; and the musty smell of dust and dead air so familiar to the congregation, had given place to the fragrance of nature mixed with the lingering scent of incense. It was a transformation in truth, complete in all

its parts; and the ladies had worked well and deserved the praise that was given to them.

Everyone was excited and almost everyone enjoyed the show, though some sturdy old Protestants shook their grizzled heads at the patent Popery of it all. Still, that did not prevent their taking their fill of the pleasure which the Church spread before them so liberally as the lure that should bring them over to attendance at her services and acceptance of her doctrines as well as of her decrees. It relieved their consciences to shake their sapient old heads and grumble behind their bandana neckerchiefs; but it gratified their senses to join in the crowd and gape and sniff with the rest. And after all, the church was their own; and a bonny sight is always a bonny sight when the cost of it does not come out of one's own pocket.

Presently the harmonium sounded a few opening chords with a bold vibrating touch. No frightened schoolmistress was the performer to-day, but the High Church organ-builder who had come down to take the dimensions of the gallery where the magnificent instrument was to stand when the restorations should be completed. The congregation rose, led by the ladies as the fuglemen who knew their lesson and gave the note of

direction; and then came in the procession of choristers and clergy, closed by Mr. Lascelles in shining white satin vestments, embroidered in gold and many-coloured silks, as the culminating point of interest. He was preceded by several strange "priests" and "brothers," in vestments of various symbolic meanings, who had poured in from London to give greater dignity to this, the first stately festival in his Crossholme kingdom; immediately behind him, his eyes bent on the ground, came Cuthbert Molyneux, solemnly swinging an incense-burner as if he believed in the lurking demons who were to be put to flight by means of its scented fumes; while before the strange priests and brothers, and heading all, marched the choir in white surplices over red, carrying candles, crosses, a banner or two, and the crucifix as the unmistakable sign of the party to which they belonged. Some of the lads rather spoilt the solemnity of the show; for, not yet broken into due decorum, they nudged each other slily and giggled and blushed like girls when they caught the eyes of their mothers and sisters fixed with pride and exultation on them as they paraded the church round the side aisles and up the nave.

The men of the village looked at each other doubtfully. This kind of thing was new to them and they did

not approve of it. But as it was not Sunday they let the banners and the crosses and candles pass as part of the raree-show. It was a kind of religious play-acting to them; and being a work-a-day matter made all the difference. Had it been Sunday, now, they said to each other, some by look and some in whispers, it would have been a crying shame and a burning sin, and nothing short of profanation and Sabbath-breaking; but week-day mountebanks are lawful, and their foolishness is not to be too gravely considered. All the same they thought it taking liberties with the Constitution, the Church as by Law established, the village and the old building itself; and each Tom and Bill wished that some other Tom or Bill would have the boldness to speak to the vicar and give him the mind of the place; while all shirked the task for themselves. Mr. Lascelles was not an easy man to deal with, as they had already found; and it is ill work plucking nettles with bare hands.

This was the general feeling of the benighted commonalty; but the ladies who had worked the banners and become familiarized with the vestments—the stole was Hermione's own work; every stitch put in, as she believed, purely for love of religion and Church observances—the ladies who had made the wreaths and crosses and all the

mystic emblems, were delighted with the results, and congratulated themselves warmly on their good fortune in possessing such a vicar as Mr. Lascelles.

How grand he looked in his beautiful new vestments symbolizing rejoicing and gladness !—how saintly, how divine, and how handsome ! More than one heart beat fast as he passed with his slow and stately step, the very ideal of a well-born, well-bred High Priest, the incarnation of godly functions and goodly manhood ! Theresa, flushed and feverish with excitement, hysterical for want of sleep and insufficient food, felt as if an archangel were passing by when she heard his measured tread, and caught the mellow notes of his well-trained voice chanting the processional hymn; and when he ascended the altar steps and stood there with his arms outstretched in the form of a cross, for a moment she was faint and dizzy with the passionate ecstasy that swelled her heart and drew the mist across her eyes like a veil—that ecstasy which made her realize the supreme bliss of a soul possessed by the Divine.

The burning love that shone in her large bright eyes, her rapt look of personal adoration, startled Mr. Lascelles himself, used as he was to the passionate love of women disguised as religious fervour—to the personal adoration

of so many before her, whom, like her, he had spiritually seduced for the good of the Church. It discomposed him for the moment. It was flattering, truly, and marked her as his own possession—and the possession of the Church through him ; but it was also a little terrible ; and he felt for the moment rather the peril of her devotion than the glory of her conversion. He must manage her carefully, else there would be trouble, and though he could meet them boldly enough if they came, he was naturally anxious to avoid all such scandals.

Then he looked at Hermione's face—animated more than usual—with a certain reckless air in the pose of her head—affectionate and even something more, as she stole one of her shy girlish glances at him; but it had not in it the possibilities of danger from excess that were in Theresa's. The one was an instrument which would yield to his touch when he chose to awaken its response, and be passive and uncomplaining when he saw fit to leave it mute. The other would respond—yes, without question respond! but the strength of the echo might break it to pieces, and the wail of those rent chords might sound too far and wide for the dignity of his office or the honour of the Church. Yes, Hermione was the safer of the two, as well as the more profitable both

socially and pecuniarily; but Theresa was the better subject for vivisection—to be conducted with caution and his hands well protected.

All this flashed in one formless thought through his mind as he stood before the altar in the attitude of a High Priest, symbolizing the cross and blessing the people, while Theresa knew the supreme bliss of spiritual ecstasy—that ecstasy which though spiritual is also sensuous; and Hermione, with darkened eyes, thought what a charming thing it was to be religious, and how happy she was in her new life! For the moment Richard, her late trouble with him and her marriage, altogether had ceased to exist, and she was now simply one of Mr. Lascelles' congregation—and the favourite member.

Perhaps Virginia was really the happiest of all. She was not quite so pale as usual, and her gentle face had even more of that tender peace which had come into it since she had known Sister Agnes, as she fixed her eyes on the white cross above the altar and prayed to Mother Mary and Our Lord to make her worthy of her privileges. And ah! what a treasure of pure love was in it as she looked over to Sister Agnes in her nunlike dress standing in voluntary

humility by the pillar in the free seats, and said an Ave as her act of thanksgiving for the gift of her spiritual mother. Then she looked at Ringrove, who was looking at her, and her eyes shone if her lips were still—glad, grateful, as she was that she had been able to bring him here, according to the command laid on her by the Sister.

That look was poor Ringrove's reward for the violence which he had done to his truest self in coming here to-day simply to please her; and, being in love, it made him think:—

"Perhaps after all such women as these are right. Perhaps they do see more clearly than we coarser and less pure men, and we might do worse than listen to them!"

It was a concession to have got so far as this; what if Virginia should care to lead him to the end?

Aunt Catherine near Sister Agnes, also ostentatiously in the free seats, was mysterious and beatified but fluttered and half coy to-day. The ladies had all come in their brightest dresses to do honour to a festival which was in its intention joyful and a thanksgiving; and Aunt Catherine was in white, with a strangely bridal character about her veil and bonnet that looked odd enough on a rosy-cheeked, apple-faced, round

little dumpling of a woman past fifty as she was. But she had dreamed last night of certain heavenly espousals by which her imagination had been more awakened than usual—and it was never very drowsy; and thinking a ghostly bridegroom better than none at all, and a marriage made in a dream a witness of sealing here which shall be proclaimed and solemnized hereafter, she had come in what she meant should express bridal array; and the meaning of which she would explain to Sister Agnes and Superior when mass was over.

For the rest, pretty Beatrice and her younger sisters were here, shame to say, in part as at a show; not having reached that state of ecclesiastical grace when the Church is the same as God, and a week-day service, with decorations like a fair, as sacred as the Sunday prayers without. She glanced often at Ringrove Hardisty; her brown eyes full of mild surprise to see him standing there, tall and superior-looking, in his pew. For she was an unconverted kind of creature; and, though thoroughly good and gentle and wholesome, had not in her the makings of a zealot—besides having no great admiration for the man who was now the great god Zeus of Crossholme. Ringrove had been always her ideal of what a strong good man should

be; and especially had she taken delight in his quiet resistance to the new vicar. And now he was here in church on a week-day, and assisting at a service that was just a Roman Catholic mass and nothing else! How odd it was, and how strange these contradictions were! And how strange too were these differences of feeling! Here was Bee Nesbitt sorrowing secretly over her friend's weakness, while Virginia's soul was elate with holy joy to think that this pleasant, good-tempered, honest-hearted sinner, known since her childhood and liked always if never loved, was so far on the road to salvation that he might one day be looked for among the saved—turned into a new path by the means of a handful of incense and a few barrow-loads of flowers! It was a very little matter on which to build up hope or fashion fear; but life is made up of small touches—and Ringrove was in love; and when men are in love there is no miracle that may not be expected, no transformation that may not be wrought.

Even Mr. Lascelles allowed himself to draw bigger conclusions than the premiss warranted. As he said to Cuthbert Molyneux in the sacristy—there was no vestry now-a-days—Virginia Fullerton's influence was evidently blessed. She had brought Mr. Hardisty to the service

to-day, as she had brought him yesterday to assist in the preparations; and, tainted as he notoriously was by the diabolical principles professed by Mr. Fullerton, it was an immense deal to have accomplished. What a gain it would be to the Church should he be won over by the means of this dear young saint, this sweet child of grace and natural piety united!

To which Cuthbert had assented warmly, so far as Virginia was concerned—but in the matter of Ringrove's possible salvation, somewhat tamely. He wondered at the time why he was not able to feel more Christian and fraternal exultation at the possible gathering-in of a notorious outsider like Ringrove. It was not like him not to hail the probable salvation of a now lost brother with effusive sympathy; yet, he would rather that Superior himself, or say his own Aunt Catherine, had been that vessel of grace by whose influence the master of Monks-hall had been won. He was not in love with Virginia; not in the least, as wholesome-minded men count love; but he was glad to be the only male sheep in the flock which held her as its most precious lamb; and he dreaded the introduction of another masculine saint, especially one so self-assertive and strong as Ringrove Hardisty. He was a good young man; a very good

young man indeed; but he had rather mistaken his vocation in being a man at all, and if he had some of the virtues of women, he had many of their faults and not a few of their foibles.

But now the procession and the processional hymn were ended; the Wicked Man and the opening exhortation had been intoned in a high-pitched key by one of the strange priests; and then the ladies dropped on their knees in the abrupt automatic manner practised by this school, which makes manner of as much account as matter, and holds it for testimony when human beings are enabled to make themselves look like marionettes jerked by a string. Virginia knelt close behind her mother in their big pew, which was soon to be cut down into an open seat in conformity with the rest. Theresa, her burning hands clasped nervously together, repeated the clauses of the Confession, while the inevitable reaction from that moment of ecstasy having set in, the hot tears of what she thought was penitence and Mr. Lascelles knew to be hysteria, streamed down her face; and the service went on in great volumes of voice and music such as they had never heard at Crossholme before, and did not know what to make of now when they did hear.

Still it was fine and heartsome. Even those most hostile could not deny the grand effect of it all, while those most committed were enraptured; and of the *tertium quid*, halting between two opinions, some were won over by the brave show and thought that there must be something in it all, and some were terrified at the papistry which now seemed to have thrown off its disguise, and would never stop until it had got its foot on their necks, and made them slaves without a voice in the disposition of their own souls.

And then, in its right place in the service, Mr. Lascelles, in his surplice tied round the waist with a cord, and with a small cap or berretta on his head, went into the pulpit, and after his usual formula, "In the name of—" crossing himself rapidly as he spoke, abruptly began his textless sermon of thanksgiving.

No pains of hell, nor penalties for sin, informed the vicar's discourse to-day. It was all jubilant, hopeful, inspiriting. It spoke much of the gratitude which we owe to the Divine Father who gives us all these good things, and who leads us so gently through the thorny ways and guides us safely over the burning ploughshares; who cares for us as His children and does not allow a hair of our heads to fall without His

will. It spoke much too of the peace which comes to souls that are reconciled to the Church, and by the power of the Church made free of divine grace and eternal forgiveness; and it extolled the beneficence of the Creator who had given us grain for our food, fruit for our refreshment, and flowers for our delight. He might have made all these things painful to us, but He made them pleasant instead; wherefore, praise be to His Name.

He left out of sight the other side of the question—the side which might put forward, as a plea for the rights of man, the elemental fact that, being here, we must live; and as by the law of our physical constitution we live by eating, we must therefore have something to eat. Also he left out of sight the possibility that the Supreme Intelligence which he assumed to magnify, was degraded by rhapsodies of wonder at necessary consequences of certain conditions—as that the earth should bring forth food when all organic nature has to be fed; or that the Benevolence which he assumed to honour was insulted by rhapsodies of gratitude in that life is not rendered more terrible than it is already to so many of us; and that, born as we are without our own consent into a world of suffering and death,

and set in the midst of circumstances which we have not shaped and cannot control, we are not punished yet more severely than we are for the sinless ignorance of our forefathers and the innocent helplessness of ourselves. Nothing of all this was so much as hinted at; and save Ringrove Hardisty, who did not pay much attention to what was being said at all, there was no one in the congregation acute enough to form these thoughts in his own mind, still less to give them utterance. So Mr. Lascelles had it all his own way, and his sermon brought comfort to some and conviction to others, and seemed to all a rational and faithful method of stating the main facts of human life.

Then the vicar ended as abruptly as he had begun; his last words being an exhortation to the people to show themselves worthy of their privileges and grateful for their blessings, by following the commands of the Church in all things:—beginning with punctual attendance at daily matins, and, for such as were fitted to receive the grace, reverent attendance at weekly Early Celebration. Then the rest of the service went on; and the offertory was the largest ever made at Crossholme.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE SACRISTY.

When the service was over Mr. Lascelles gave notice that any of his parishioners who wished to speak to him—about their souls—would find him in the sacristy for an hour from that time, or for so much longer as he might be wanted. This too was a fitting occasion for the thin end, and he wished to gently insinuate it before he drove home the wedge with what he meant should prove to be irresistible force. He knew human nature so well! and he knew that when the senses have been stirred, as now, hearts are softened, consciences are awakened, and the reason is sent to sleep with fear, caution, and distrust. And as he intended to establish confession as a practice of faith and duty, he thought he might as well begin with the alphabet to-day.

He had already told Hermione and the Churchlands family what he intended to do, so far as receiving his parishioners in the sacristy after service went; but he did not say even to them that he intended this as the

beginning of weekly confession. He had merely asked Theresa to come in to him when service should be over; and to Hermione he had said, with friendly meaning and a graceful kind of partiality:—

"Do you come the last of all, dear Mrs. Fullerton. Wait until the rest have gone and then come in."

The prospect of this private conference had a little disturbed the devotions of both these ladies. Perhaps it would be better to say, it had heightened their fervour but distorted the direction. The vicar and the Almighty were getting sadly entangled in their minds, the one for love and the other for authority, and to obey Mr. Lascelles was to both perilously synonymous with obeying God; which was exactly the state of mind that he wished to produce.

The first however to go into the quondam vestry, and present sacristy, was Adam Bell, the sharp, keen-witted chandler of the village. He went, he said, in great mental distress and some perplexity. He could not rest, he continued, drawing down the corners of his mouth like a man who has a secret grief which he is about to disclose, until he had discharged his conscience and told the vicar how things were going in the parish;—also, until he had confessed manfully his

own share of the blame in having gone to hear one whose teaching was so outlandish and full of harm. He then gave a clever but inexact account of Mr. Fullerton's lecture the night before last; which he translated as an invitation to men to take life easy and make the best of the sunshine when it comes, and not bother themselves with the idea that this is wrong and that disallowed by God, for there is no such thing as right or wrong anyway, and God is only a name put forth by the priests to frighten folk into submission. And then he professed himself uneasy in his mind, and indeed he might say penitent, for having listened to such blasphemy. So long as Mr. Fullerton had confined himself to telling them a few plain facts about stones and gases, bones and crystals, he said, he had been glad to listen to him and learn from him; but when he touched sacred things, then he, Adam Bell, parted company with him, and would go no more to hear him.

The keen eyes glancing here and there restlessly, furtively, never looking straight into the face that looked straight enough at him, told their own miserable tale, and condemned the would-be penitent as a renegade, as he had been a spy from the beginning. Mr. Lascelles, no longer looking down with that affected humility, that

artificial reticence which was one of his professional tricks, but fixing his eyes boldly on the mean and crafty face before him, took the measure of the man who thus offered himself for his service, and appraised him at his true value. The vicar was not one to be easily deceived, however smooth in speech and careful he might be not to show distrust. Men whose object in life is to use others and to make all things subserve a settled plan, seldom are easily taken in. But Adam Bell's treachery and ratting pleased him as a sign of what he at least thought of the way in which things were going, and what was to be the dominant rule of the parish. It was a straw; but straws are good indicators of the quarter whence the wind blows; and the Crossholme chandler served this turn as well as any other.

He showed nothing however of the contempt that he felt; but thanking Adam gravely for his information, said a few words of priestly exhortation, perhaps more friendly than priestly, and then ended the interview a little abruptly. The farce was too transparent to need lengthening out; and Mr. Lascelles, though he did not disdain to use his office as a lever, did not like to degrade it by humbug that was confessed and palpable—besides having the disdain of the gentleman for the trickiness of

a cur. He could do dishonourable things on his own account when need be, but he was always the gentleman even when he did; he was right then to disdain the trickiness of a cur!

When Adam Bell went, Aunt Catherine came in with the story of her dream; wanting dear Superior to confirm her in her belief that it was a true vision—an actual spiritual occurrence—and that henceforth she might look upon herself as Chosen and a bride. But Mr. Lascelles would not go all the way with her.

"Before confession and absolution?" he demurred; "while still so young in the practices of the Church?—not having attained the counsels of perfection? I should be inclined, dear Miss Molyneux, to accept it rather as a picture of the possible future when you shall have taken still higher rank in the world of grace, and have learnt more thoroughly the mind of the Church and how to obey her ordinances."

It was a hard blow to the poor little woman. Religion had been to her a very charming and a very flattering drama wherein she had her part to play, with saints and angels and Divine personages all round for her comrades. She had no idea of creeping painfully up steep places and walking humbly on the lower levels. She held to

sudden conversions and souls snatched up, like so many Elijahs, straight from earth to heaven, without the necessity of middle terms of striving and discipline. She cried a good deal when Mr. Lascelles blew down her house of holy cards, and made her understand that she was still in the dark ages of comparative ignorance, and still had much to do and far to go before she should be accepted as she believed she had already been.

But tears or not, it was what he had to teach and she to learn. For though his object was to excite and warm the imaginations and affections of his people to the wildest extremes, they must all be under discipline —all be under the guidance and control of the Church, without whose permission there could be no visions or spiritual marriages, no dreaming of divine dreams or spiritual camping out in high latitudes. Aunt Catherine had gone too fast. She must be checked; taught the duty of humility and obedience; and sent to the bottom of the class, with hope only, not fulfilment.

"Learn the will of God through the Church; practise faithfully your duties, dear Miss Molyneux; and what has been only a vision now will become a reality. But you have something to learn yet, and something to do; and one of the first necessities for such grace as your

loving soul desires is confession—with priestly absolution to follow. There are many, many more essentials;—works of corporal mercy to perform; works of spiritual mercy to fulfil; fasting, abstinence, and absolute obedience; counsels of perfection to attain. Heaven is not won by a *coup de main*, dear lady, and the strait gate which leads to the narrow way is not to be carried by assault. I am sorry to distress you, but my duty as your priest bids me destroy your hope."

"I will obey you in all things," sobbed poor Aunt Catherine in her humiliation. "Nothing will be too hard for me to do if I can but make my dream of last night true. Oh, it was so good to feel safe and accepted!"

"Take it as a prevision—a state to be attained after diligent endeavour, and something for which to live and strive," said Mr. Lascelles.

And Aunt Catherine, with a crushed mien and a sore heart, said "Thank you" gratefully, and still weeping left the vestry, a poorer woman by many degrees than when she entered.

She was not the only penitential Niobe whom Mr. Lascelles received in his sacristy this day. Theresa, broken with hysterical emotion, in the depths of

spiritual despair—because of what?—her realization of sin, she thought to herself, poor innocent girl of twenty-two; she, who had never done harm to human being, nor even come to the knowledge of the forces which stirred her!—feeling lost and abandoned by God and all good angels, and only yearning to be taken into the arms of some strong Saviour who should guard her from herself and from evil alike—poured out her flood of self-accusation, of self-betrayal, as she knelt at the vicar's feet and wept out the passion of her love disguised as sorrow for her soul's sin.

He understood it all. He was forty years of age, and he had not made the study of the human heart, and above all of the female heart, his chief care in vain. He read her like an open book, as he had read some others before now; and smiled at the poor little transparent subterfuge with which she hid the truth from herself and turned it full to the light for him. Here was no need of grave admonition to curb the too ambitious flight of a vain and somewhat silly spirit; here were needed precious balms that should heal, not caustic that would eat out the proud flesh starting so mischievously to the surface. But they must be balms administered gently and sparingly; balms that should

soothe but not nourish—that should still keep the sight enchanted as with the old-time dwellers in fairy-land, but not give the power of showing to the world that she had the right to see and the claim to speak.

"God is calling you, my child," he said gently. "In your tears He is speaking to you; in your yearning, your despair, you are feeling for Him. He will not abandon you; trust to me, your pastor, me, sent to be your guide and leader. Lean on me, child, and I will carry you to the foot of His throne, to the presence and the knowledge of Eternal Life. The Church can do all things, and the priest has power to absolve, to teach, and to save."

"Can I ever be saved, I who am so wicked?" cried Theresa, burying her face in her hands. "I am so full of sin, so abominable altogether."

The faintest smile crossed the vicar's thin lips.

"If you repent and turn away from your wickedness," he said gravely. "Grace is never denied the penitent and faithful."

She lifted her tear-stained agonized face to the light, her large dark feverish eyes looking full into his.

"Can I ever be assured of salvation?" she cried; "shall I ever know the feeling of acceptance?"

He took both her hands in one of his, and with the other smoothed her hair.

"Trust me," he said with grave tenderness; "I will be your pastor in the secret and divine sense, as well as openly by my office. You shall be my soul's care, my child in the Church, my spiritual beloved. Will you not trust me, child, your director and father appointed by the Church to lead you?"

The touch of his long, white, scented hand seemed to act as a charm on her; the word "beloved" sank down like sweetest music into her soul, but music that calmed while it inspired her. The flush did not fade from her cheeks nor the feverish brightness from her eyes, but her tears no longer flowed, and the poor parched lips, pinched and strained before, relaxed into a smile like that of a child in sleep. She looked so tender, so confiding, so innocently impassioned, so slight of frame, so frail of health—there was something in her that was so appealing, so eloquent of suffering and sincerity and love—that the vicar might have been forgiven had he forgotten his priesthood and remembered only his humanity and that marriage is an honourable estate. But he did not. What she felt he knew well enough. He had seen it too often before not to understand

every sign of it now; and he meant to make his account of it now as he had done before; but he himself was neither moved nor warmed, neither disordered nor elated. He was only the vivisector studying phenomena and interpreting symptoms; only the priest binding his victim to the horns of the altar; the fisher of men hauling in his net with his prize.

The moment had come when he could clinch all this excitement, and with one blow make it serviceable to his purpose. In a grave and tender but eminently priestly manner he told her what he wished her to do, and framed her answers of confession to his questions of inquisition. Oh, how sweet it was to be thus questioned by him! to bare her secret soul before him! to kneel there at his feet and lay her innermost being without veil or disguise in his hands! to give him that greatest gift which a woman has to bestow—the gift of her spiritual freedom, her self-respect, her reticence, her reserve! There was no evil deed done of which she had to make shameful confession, as there was no hostile influence at home or in her own heart which he must set himself to overcome. It was only her soul that she had to declare—only her selfhood that she had to yield into his keeping. He questioned her of her waking

thoughts and nightly dreams; he probed now the yearning and now the suffering, to which she gave fancy names that disguised the truth from herself but not from him. When she looked up with her feverishly bright eyes, and said how ardently she longed to realize Christ and feel Him always with her, he stooped his head low to hers and whispered a few words which seemed to give her all she wanted; and when she spoke of her spiritual darkness, her loneliness by reason of her consciousness of sin, he assured her of the divine companionship because of the divine love that was around her. Then he gave her absolution, and imposed a few light precious penances—such as prayers and fastings and observances to be followed rather for the sake of the good which lies in acts of obedience than as punishment for her sins. And then he lifted her gently from the ground and pressed her to him—paternally.

Her heart was throbbing wildly, her blood was all on fire, her brain was dizzy with excitement. He was as calm and cool as in his quietest moments.

"You are very, very precious to me," he said tenderly, but with the same priestly intonation as before. "You are my child, consecrated to my care."

She clung to him confidingly.

"Thank you," she said simply.

He stooped his head and kissed her on the forehead. Were not the elect sealed there?

"Now you know," he said, "how dear you are to me—Theresa."

It was the first time that he had called her by her name; and had anything been wanting to complete her deep sense of blessedness it would have been found in the sweet and holy familiarity of this splendid high-priest in the Church of Christ.

"And now you must be good, my child, and show me that you deserve my love, my pastoral care; that you profit by my ministrations, and will not falsify the hope of my heart. We must have no more tears, no more sorrow or hesitation. Your pride has been broken down, and your heart turned to God once and for all time; now, cheerfully and hopefully, follow on the way which the Church marks out, as one of her dearest and most dutiful daughters. Doubt of acceptance, so godly in the beginning—so necessary until you receive grace and pardon by absolution—may become doubt of that grace—disbelief in that pardon; which is a tempting of the devil and to be resisted as much as overweening pride. Do you understand me, Theresa?"

He said these last words gently, caressing her with his hand.

"Yes," said Theresa, in a low voice.

To stand there encircled by those holy arms, resting on that divine breast, was enough for her, so far. She was calmed, consoled, soothed. He had given her the assurance of divine acceptance; why then should she doubt or weep? Was not he her friend? Was not God her Saviour? This harvest festival would stand for ever in her mind as the epoch whence she should date her personal happiness and spiritual peace; and she must for ever connect this beloved priest with her hopes of salvation and her assurance of acceptance.

She lifted her face to him, softened and less disordered than when she had entered. His kiss had been both the seal of her blessedness and the charter of her acceptance. It had transformed her from Magdalen the sinner to Magdalen the saint; but whether sinner or saint, Magdalen the woman who loved. And when, to study the effect for a second time, the vicar pressed her to him as tenderly as before, and again laid his cold thin lips on her forehead, she felt as if she had been taken bodily into heaven, where some supreme archangel had received her.

All life had a different significance for her, all human feeling other issues than she had ever known before, as she left the sacristy and turned into the church still redolent and glowing with the offerings of the time. How cold and tame and meaningless all her other loves had been, she thought, compared to this her love for the Church and religion! She cast herself on her knees before the altar and prayed with a very passion of yearning, a very ecstasy of thanksgiving, that seemed to draw her soul away from her body and fill it with divine light and life. Heaven seemed to open to her—the majesty and mystery of the Divine were revealed as in a painted picture above the altar. With eyes strained upward, hands clasped and body rigid, she realized one of the ecstatic visions of her namesake, Saint Theresa; and when the sacristan, who was once the clerk, came to do something with the flowers, he found young Miss almost gone, as he told his wife in a voice of awe; and if so be as Madam Fullerton had not been closeted with the vicar, he would have called him out to help; he did not add—to look at his own sorry work.

And now there was Hermione with whom Mr. Lascelles had to deal. She was both more manageable and less dangerous than Theresa—more profitable, too;

though he hoped to make the Churchlands family profitable enough to the cause before he had done with them; but she had to be handled in a different manner from that which best suited the girl. It was more subtle play with her, and an enemy to be fought through her;—another set of feelings altogether to be manipulated, and love to be craftily gained for ulterior ends, not love already gained to be soothed for fear of danger. What a sense of power all these women gave him! How weak they were! how contemptible, and yet how interesting!

Mr. Lascelles was gracious, courteous, unexcited, but tenderly alive to the grace of this visit and the social importance as well as the personal charm of the visitor—as much the gentleman as the priest—when Mrs. Fullerton came in, as he had desired, the last of all. It was late now; long past the usual luncheon-time at the Abbey—that house of unbroken regularity and monotonous sameness of habit—but Mr. Lascelles was glad that again to-day the antagonism between himself and her husband should be shown clearly, and that Richard should see for himself which was the stronger of the two.

At first Hermione, still in her wilful, reckless mood, had also been glad to put this little affront on her husband. He deserved punishment at her hands and

she was not sorry to humiliate him—so far—and to show him that she cared no more for him than he for her; and that if he did not think it worth while to strain a point for her pleasure, neither would she inconvenience herself for his. But as time wore on she began to relent. Opposition, like independence, was so new to her, so foreign to her nature—and she had loved Richard so much, and she once believed that he had loved her also so much, before he had become a philosopher and a sceptic! She did not want to hurt him really; and she knew that this break in the home habits, for such reasons as she had to give, would hurt him. Besides, she was getting hungry for her own part; and she was annoyed that Theresa Molyneux had stayed so long with the vicar. It was not nice, she thought; and she wondered at Superior—whom however, being annoyed, she called mentally Mr. Lascelles—for allowing this long interview which was a kind of slight on her own claims. So that altogether she had somewhat veered in her feelings since the benediction, and came in looking a little sulky and undeniably dignified. At a glance Mr. Lascelles took in the change, and understood the ruffled state of her feeling for him, which of course meant corresponding smoothness towards her husband.

"I am so sorry that you have had to wait so long," he said with his best breeding, placing her in a chair opposite to him.

No kneeling penitent pouring out her love as confession of sin was this fair creature—as yet—but just a lady of the parish consulting him, the vicar, on parochial matters.

"It is very late. I do not know what they will say at home," said Hermione gravely.

"I will not keep you long, but indeed I must have a word with you to-day," said Mr. Lascelles more gravely, looking at her intently.

She looked up half frightened at his air and manner. What was amiss? What had he to say that called forth a tone so full of menaced danger?

"I am afraid that I shall have to mar the perfectness of this blessed day to you, Mrs. Fullerton," he began; "but the cross laid on us to bear must be carried at all costs, and there is no happiness in a false peace."

"What has happened?" she asked, turning pale.

"More than I dare trust myself to speak of, save in generals," he answered. "But I must tell you so much: that your husband's lectures, dear Mrs.

Fullerton, are simply the scandal and the sin of the parish."

"I know how dreadful his opinions are!" she cried nervously. "But I can do nothing! I am helpless to prevent them! He will not listen to me—I have no influence over him, and he will go his own way, whatever I may say!"

Mr. Lascelles, still looking at her narrowly, thought to himself: "How much will she bear?"—he must feel his way cautiously, if boldly.

"He is the curse of the place," he said solemnly. "He is the direct leader of souls to hell."

Hermione shuddered.

"It is dreadful," she said helplessly. "It breaks my heart, and always has, to know that he holds such awful opinions; but what can I do?"

"You cannot stop him?" he asked. "If I were to tell you what he said the night before last, I think you would be ready to take almost any steps that I might recommend to check this awful flood of blasphemy and sin which he pours out in that place of yours. To men too ignorant to understand even his few paltry facts in natural science he preaches license to sin—for there is no God and no hereafter and

laughs at all but human law and human knowledge, ridiculing justice and mercy together—denying God and Satan in one. It is an awful state of things, Mrs. Fullerton, and the responsibility rests on you as well as on him; for, though you are his wife, you are the owner of the estate."

She did not quite take in his meaning.

Tears gathered into her eyes.

"Yes, I am his wife," she said; "but he is the master. And though I know how wickedly he thinks on matters that are dear and sacred to everyone else—yet he is so good in himself!" she added; her heart turning back to him as her consciousness of his faithful love and noble intentions compelled her to defend him. She acknowledged his blameworthiness; he was an infidel, a sinner, the denier of all that she held dear—but "he is so good," was the truth as well.

"How can you call that good which is in direct hostility to Christianity and the Church?" said Mr. Lascelles more sternly than he had ever spoken to Hermione Fullerton before. "This is indeed preferring the creature to the Creator—saying to evil, 'Be thou my good!'"

"I do not think he means to do harm," she said apologetically, frightened at the vicar's manner.

"And he succeeds in doing more—of greater extent and of graver consequences—than any man ever known to me in person," he replied. "Not one of the most infamous men of history—not Voltaire, nor Rousseau, nor Paine—not one of the whole tribe of Judas, crucifying Christ afresh as they did, was a more blasphemous infidel than is your husband, or did more awful mischief to the immortal souls of the men with whom they came in contact."

"What is to be done?" she cried in a despairing voice.

It was hard on her to have the brightness of the day darkened by such a terrible vision, such a fearful parallel; and poor Richard, wicked as he was, had once been so sweet and dear!

Mr. Lascelles, still looking at her, thought again: "Is the time ripe?"

"You are mistress. Your husband is only your agent," he said slowly.

"He is master in reality," she answered. "I have no power."

"You can have it if you will," he said, still watching her.

She sighed. "Things have gone on too long as they are, and I could not change them now even if I wished," she said. "I should like to have some things different from what they are; and yet—I could not do anything to really hurt him—angry as I am with him!" she added; her old love for him overmastering her for the moment.

Mr. Lascelles was silent. His nostrils quivered and his thin lips curled, but he put force on himself and said nothing. No; the time was not yet ripe; but it would come. As sure as to-morrow's sun would rise it would come, and that Dagon of sin and infidelity would be overthrown. After a time he spoke, quietly and almost monotonously in voice and manner, but with what he wished her to understand as disappointment and sadness.

"In this case you must come out publicly," he said. "You must let it be patent to the world that you do not share your husband's blasphemous enmity to revealed religion—his diabolical hostility to the Church, that ark of man's salvation. You must separate your action from his, and show the world that you are faithful if he has made himself a castaway."

"That is only my duty," said Hermione relieved.

"Tell me how I can best prove to the world that I am a Christian, and I will do it," she added fervently, a little carried out of herself.

"I will tell you," he said in his high-priestly manner. "It is not difficult;—Undertake the restoration of the whole church in your own name. This will do something to neutralize the fearful mischief worked by your husband in the parish and on your own estate."

She gave a little gasp.

"That will be costly," she said.

"About ten thousand pounds," he answered with indifference. "We might get it done for eight, but I think it will come to ten if it is done as I wish."

She looked distressed. She was the most generous woman in the world by nature—and the least conscious of the value of money; but she was startled at the sum named—for her husband's sake not her own.

"I scarcely know if Richard will consent," she said in extreme embarrassment.

"I do not see that his consent is necessary," said Mr. Lascelles, holding his head high. "You are the person to be consulted, not he. You are the Lady of the Manor, the lay rector; you receive the great tithes which ought to belong to the church, and hold the estate

which was once the church's property—taken from God for man. It is your affair entirely, and I do not recognize Mr. Fullerton's share in the matter."

"Yes, I know," she said, looking down, embarrassed, ill at ease, set between two fires and burned by both. "But if we cannot really give so much money? When I asked for my allowance a little while ago, Richard said that our income and expenditure exactly met, and stipulated that I should pay my own milliner; so that if there is not money enough, what is to be done?"

"For the sake of God's house and His glory, cannot you make some little personal sacrifice?" asked Mr. Lascelles eagerly;—"put down a carriage?—a horse or two?—a servant here and there?—or, if necessary sell your jewels, your silver? Or, cannot you make your husband close that devil's shop of his, that reading-room built on your own ground and maintained at some cost, as we all know? Say the restoration of the church will be ten thousand pounds;—that is five hundred a year given to the Lord and snatched from the propagation of infidelity. I cannot believe that you will hesitate, Mrs. Fullerton."

The vicar spoke sternly and strongly. It was like a heavy hand laid on the pretty gentle creature's shoulder.

"If only my husband would!" she sighed again, looking up, appealing against his strength in mercy to her weakness.

"Then take back your lapsed rights and deal with your own property according to your own sense of duty," he cried irritated.

She drew back.

"He is my husband," she said with a frightened glance to the door.

"Well! you must use your own discretion—perhaps wifely caresses and cajolings will do what you desire," said Mr. Lascelles with almost brutal contempt: "and if these fail"—he shrugged his shoulders expressively—"one means of grace will be shut off from you and one occasion of testifying! I shall not be the sufferer, nor will the Church," he went on to say with a certain indifference of manner that galled her more than all the rest. "I have asked your co-operation first, as my inclination and the respect due to your position in the parish prompted, but if you cannot or will not!"—he shrugged his shoulders again and beat his finger-tips lightly on the table. "The chancel is your own property, and that you must restore," he continued; "and what else you refuse the Molyneux's will accept. They

have asked to be allowed to make liberal restitution to that House of God which their ancestors defrauded and despoiled. And I have promised to give them all that you reject."

"At least the chancel is my own property. They cannot interfere there," said Hermione with a deep flush.

"Of course, I know that; have I not just said so?" he answered unpleasantly. "To restore it in harmony with the rest of the church is not only your duty, but your obligation—your legal obligation," he repeated. "What I wanted was that you should undertake the whole of the church, leaving to us the windows and organ. It would be cheering to me personally if you came forward prominently, unmistakably, as one of my supporters here in this uphill fight. And what joy it would be to my soul to think of your name as handed down in everlasting protest against the sin which else is committed under its sanction and upheld by your fortune—sin which is indelible here and hereafter, and which will be brought against you, as the accomplice, at the Last Great Day!"

She shuddered.

"If only Richard would!" she repeated quivering.

He rose from his chair, and stood towering above her.

"You make your marriage idolatrous," he said sternly. "Your infidel husband, whom you should spurn from you as a viper—as a child of hell—stands nearer to you than your God, than your Saviour. This is not love, it is idolatry!" he repeated.

There was nothing of the courtly courteous gentleman about him now. He had risen to the height of his office and was the inquisitor who probed, the priest who condemned, not the admiring friend who now flattered and now consoled, now gently directed and now fervently rewarded. Never in her life before had she been spoken to as now. She, the petted plaything of her father, the tenderly adored of her husband—if once passionately and now gravely, yet always tenderly!—she to be held as it were by a torturer, a master, an executioner! Appalled, terrified, she shrank within herself at the stern voice, the attitude full of spiritual menace, the words that passed so terrible a sentence on her.

"Have I no power consigned to me by God?" he went on to say, speaking more rapidly but no less severely. "Have I no authority as your priest, your spiritual director? You know that I have! You dare not look up and defy me. And here, in this holy place, I command you in the name of God to obey me. I

your priest, order you to undertake this work as your tribute to the Church, your offering to our Lord! Let it bring what discord it will into that unblessed house of yours—that is not my affair, nor should it be yours in the face of your greater duty. What is mine is to enforce your obedience; what yours, to give it!"

Hermione sat there paralyzed, overcome with terror and dismay. It was like some terrible dream—some awful vision. She did not recognize the man whose grace and subtle flattery had touched her imagination and stirred the long-stagnant waters of romance. He was a new impersonation; but something still more compelling, still less to be resisted than the former.

She turned away her face sobbing with terror. They were sobs that had no tears in them, but were just inarticulate cries of fear. The vestry seemed to grow dark as night; the radiant earth and help of men to be shut out from her for ever; God was no longer a loving Father to be approached with gladness, trust, love, but a stern and implacable Judge, denouncing and condemning her by the mouth of this his high-priest. The vicar's form seemed to dilate to more than human stature, his eyes to burn into her soul as if they had been flames of fire. All the foolish sinful thoughts that had ever passed

through her mind, all the foolish sinful things that she had ever done in wilfulness or ignorance, came back on her memory in one great flood of spiritual remorse and shame. She felt as if the man standing there before her could read the whole unsatisfactory story of her life, which terror and exaltation exaggerated into crime, deepened into spiritual apostasy and wickedness that could not be forgiven.

"Have mercy!" she sobbed, shrinking together in her fear.

Did she pray to him or to God? She could not have said which; for at that moment the two were one, and the vicar was God impersonate.

"Kneel!" said Mr. Lascelles in a deep voice, lifting her from the chair as he had lifted Theresa from the ground, but instead of taking her to his arms forcing her to her knees. And scarcely knowing what she did or where she was, the wife of Richard Fullerton, the free-thinker, the pronounced enemy of the Church, the confessed agnostic knowing nothing where others formulate all, knelt at the vicar's feet, and led by him made her first broken pitiful confession.

When she arose from her knees she had promised three things:—one that she would publicly defray at her

sole cost the restoration of the church; another that she would obey all the rules of discipline which he, the vicar —her Director now—might enjoin on her—her husband willing or unwilling; and the third that she would confess to him weekly, here in the sacristy, to be directed according to the will of the Church and for the best welfare of her own soul. But this last matter was to be kept as yet a profound secret from every one. In return for all which promises he gave her absolution, and assured her of eternal forgiveness and his own deep sympathy, affection, and esteem.

CHAPTER XII.

DEFEATED.

THE vicar had been some months now at Crossholme, but he had accepted no social invitations of ceremony; nothing beyond a family dinner at Churchlands when they were quite alone, or a quiet cup of afternoon tea with other favoured members of his flock. Invitations to formal dinners had poured in as matters of course, but all had been refused,—and—notwithstanding the relations existing between the Vicarage and the Abbey—with as much stiffness there as elsewhere. Perhaps indeed with more; breaking bread with an infidel of Richard's uncompromising type not being much in the line of a man who, whatever else he might be, was at least as sincere in his faith as he was unscrupulous in his methods of obtaining influence.

He had said this one day with bold disdain when Hermione had asked him timidly why he would not come? Of late his disdain had been getting even bolder. As his power over the wife increased, the thin film of

consideration that he had had for her husband—for policy—grew thinner and thinner; and once he said, speaking generally, that he looked on an infidel as a kind of outlaw, one who had put himself as far beyond the pale of personal courtesies as he was beyond that of the Christian communion, and whom it was lawful to fight with any weapon that might lie handy.

A short time however after the Harvest Festival with its memorable results and unfinished dramas, the vicar said to Hermione pleasantly, that he wished she would ask him to meet General Sir Angus and Lady Maine. Sir Angus had just been appointed commandant to the garrison at Starton; and Lady Maine was his superior officer. "She might make a grand affair of it if she liked," he added still more pleasantly, and in the way of one conferring an obligation. "He would like to meet the Maines first under her roof," he continued, "feeling for her what he did. Others he knew were preparing to make up dinner-parties for this purpose; but would she not take precedence?"

Mr. Lascelles had the oddest way possible of taking little liberties of this kind with his friends. He held his flock as a band whereof he was the head; a little knot of holy communists whose goods he could administer

and whose actions he could command in his quality of Superior. And acting on these assumptions he said what from others would have been unwarrantable impertinence so frankly, so simply, with such a lofty unconsciousness that he could possibly give offence, such a pleasant faith in human kindness, so much trust in the loyal docility of his chosen band, that no one thought of being offended;—and women indeed liked his small freedoms; received them as spiritual caresses; and thought themselves favoured in proportion to the extent to which he carried them. Even had not Hermione begun her life of absolute submission in confession she would still have accepted this proposal as a proof of friendship and goodwill. As things were it was a grace for which she was bound to feel grateful.

Her face brightened with joy as she said prettily:

"I am so glad—thank you, Superior!" then added —"I will ask my husband what day will suit him; and I will write the notes this evening."

Mr. Lascelles smiled. It was not quite the same kind of smile as before. That pretty woman's foolish obedience—idolatrous submission rather! he thought angrily—to that infidel husband of hers still so strong in her, despite his own undeniable influence over her,

always irritated him when shown. It was a delicate thing for a Director, a priest believing in St. Paul, to teach wifely rebellion ; but this obstructive loyalty to an atheist, this habitual deference to a son of perdition, was unrighteous ; and, come what might, it should be broken down.

"You are without exception the most obedient wife it has ever been my lot to meet," he said with that unmistakable touch of sarcasm in the voice by which words of praise are made into sentences of condemnation. "You are the perfection of conjugal submission ! In general the lady of the house manages all these little social matters by herself, without consulting her husband, and often without heeding his convenience. It comes hard sometimes on men who are greatly occupied ; but to one like Mr. Fullerton, without engagements or outside duties, it would not much signify. The greater marvel of self-effacing sweetness, the greater perfectness of conjugal submission in you ! "

"I know that I am very weak," said Hermione with a nervous laugh and heightened colour ; "but it has grown into a habit. It would seem quite strange were I to arrange anything whatever without first consulting my husband."

"I can understand that, married so young as you were," said Mr. Lascelles, with a certain grand air of liberality and comprehension which he was accustomed to put on when he meant to give a blow; "and yet," smiling, "you have already broken through your habit of deference in one or two things of late. I fancy he has not been consulted on that question of confirmation for our child, of which we spoke yesterday; and I am sure that he understands nothing of the place which you hold with me—and I with you. He does not know that I am your Director and that you are my penitent and precious charge."

"Of course not," said Hermione a little confused. "He knows nothing of my religious life, nor shall he. He would only exasperate me by his infidelity, and make things difficult for Virginia."

"And the free will, under direction, which you have exercised in one thing it would be better on all accounts if you carried into others," said Mr. Lascelles. "Witness that private income which was one of the first matters on which I advised you—and witness the divine peace that has come to you since your reconciliation with God and your acceptance into the living body of the Church."

"Yes," said Hermione in a low voice, her eyes filling with tears.

She did not feel much at peace, but if Superior said she was, she supposed that he was right; still, if she were really so happy as he said, why those ready tears?

"You see, dear Mrs. Fullerton," he continued, drawing a little nearer to her, and taking her soft small hand in his; "you have now by your side a daughter—our sweet child—whose mind you have to train in part, and for whose soul you are chiefly responsible. Is it well, think you, for her to see this complete self-effacement of the mother in favour of the father—the mother a believer and the father an infidel? For her sake you ought to show more character and stand out against the tyranny of your husband with more boldness of protest. The effect of things as they are cannot be quite wholesome for her."

Hermione looked down disturbed. She was discontented with her husband—truly—but after all, more superficially than openly, so far at least as things had gone. What they might grow into was another matter. And she was strongly, powerfully fascinated by Mr. Lascelles; displeased with the infidelity of the one and out of sympathy with the main direction of his character,

while led away by the doctrine and authority of the other. But between displeasure, more vague than positive, and taking such independent action openly as would lead to pain and trouble at home, was a wide step; and she did not feel quite strong enough for it, yet. She was glad to be flattered personally and petted spiritually by Mr. Lascelles; to confess and be absolved; to complain and be soothed; to be reminded of her dignities and condoled with on her undesignated wrongs; to be made to feel that she was a suffering saint for truth's sake, and an oppressed wife whose very virtues had been turned into weapons of offence and causes of humiliation; to be idealized to herself and set in graceful poses before a moral mirror. All this was delightful, and gave her life new colour and her days a new romance. But to openly affront her husband was not in the programme, and would only complicate matters. Still, Mr. Lascelles had a strong will; and she had given him the one hair which was to be his purchase over all the rest.

He saw her hesitation.

"Forgive me," he said with a rapid change of manner—a manner that conveyed the impression of being wounded by her want of trust, and a determination not to cross the boundary line again; to be never

anything more than the priest and ghostly director. His personal friendship was not appreciated, and for the future he would know how to guard himself from rebuff. Reticence was easier to him than undertaking an ungrateful task, and so she should find. "Forgive me. I ought not to take it upon myself to advise you in temporal matters. It is only my deep sympathy with you—my sorrow for the undeserved trials and sufferings of your life—my desire to see your wrongs righted and your noble nature allowed free scope; only my intense admiration and deep affection for one so cruelly circumstanced and so deserving of all homage, that makes me overstep the barriers of conventional restraint. But I will not do it again. It displeases you."

"No, no, indeed not, dear Superior!" said poor Hermione warmly. "I am more grateful to you than I can say for your advice. It is always so good and wise. It seems to me that you are the only sincere friend I have ever had in my life. You are what my brother would have been if I had had one!"

She looked at him with innocent lovingness.

"I am more than that," he answered fervently, kindling at her glance, and pressing her hand more warmly. "I am your father in the Church," he added

in another tone, drawing himself away and letting her hand fall, while he loosened the band round his throat, as he saw the fair face flush and the pretty dark blue eyes droop like a girl's. "Am I not your Director?"

"Yes," said Hermione, after a pause. She felt as if she had just had a shower-bath. And she did not like shower-baths.

"Then you do really wish me to be your worldly adviser outside my spiritual functions?" continued Mr. Lascelles, after another rather long silence between them, again taking her hand.

She raised her eyes to his face. "Yes," she said, with a certain controlled intensity that let him see into her heart. "You are the only disinterested friend that I have, and it is my duty to obey you."

"You are right!" he said passionately. "Right in your obedience, and in your belief in my pure disinterestedness of affection. I am your friend and your only one! Well!" more briskly, as if shaking off a dangerous feeling; "let me continue in my pleasant task of advising you in all things; and let me begin with the little affair of the dinner. I am to dine with you to meet the Maines? Good. Now, say when. You know quite well that it is your duty to make these

arrangements. Now," raising his hand playfully, "no excuses. Exercise your own free will, your own right as mistress of the house, and say now at once when it shall be. I tell you frankly, I will accept only your invitation. As I said once before to you, no power on earth should make me cross the threshold of the Abbey were it not that it is your house. The place where the enemy of the Church weaves his accursed plots for the ruin of men's souls and the destruction of our own dear Mother is no place for a minister of Christ!"

"I can understand that," said Hermione dejectedly. "It must be dreadful for you!"

"No, not while you and our child are there—not if I go by your own sole invitation. You see, I look on you as the personage and your husband as your unfortunate appendage; you are the substance and he is the accident. But this is reversed if you put the power over everything into his hands, and make him the chief while you are the subordinate. Then indeed I could not accept the Abbey hospitality! Do you not understand me, dear child?"

"Yes," said Hermione, flattered but inwardly frightened.

"Good again! When then shall our grand dinner come off?" he asked laughingly.

"When you like," she answered. "Fix the day yourself; all are alike to me."

"Let me see—to-day is Saturday," he said musingly.

"Shall I say next Friday?—but that is scarcely a long enough invitation," asked the graceless creature.

He smiled.

"Friday?" he repeated, arching his eyebrows. "A fast-day? I never go out on Friday!"

She blushed in confusion.

"Of course not! How stupid of me to forget," she said, as if Friday fasting had been part of the ordinary consideration of her life. "When then?" nervously.

"Not Friday, because it is fast-day; not Saturday, because it is Sunday eve. Next Monday or Tuesday week," he answered.

"Let it be Tuesday," she returned innocently. "Monday is Richard's lecture night."

Mr. Lascelles suddenly stiffened. His lips went into a thin straight line, and his nostrils quivered like those of a fretted horse.

"I am afraid this is the only day that I can give you," he said coldly. "Now that I think of it, Tuesday is impossible. It must be Monday or nct at all."

"But what can we do about my husband's lecture?"

asked Hermione in genuine embarrassment. She was beginning to find her new master's hand a little heavy.

"It is simple enough," said Mr. Lascelles with cold contempt. "He must choose between his duties as a host and a gentleman and this lecture—from the blasphemy of which it would be a mercy that the misguided men who listen to him should be saved if only for once!"

"Yes, it would," she answered helplessly.

"Then I am to consider myself engaged for Monday week, provided the Maines and the rest can come?" he asked, his eyes glittering.

"Certainly; with pleasure," answered Hermione, hers drooping and her heart as heavy as lead though she did her best to speak cheerfully.

He smiled his superior smile. "What a weak, pretty creature it was!" he thought; but all the more valuable for his purpose. She was the battle-ground on which the duel *à outrance*, that had already begun between himself and that godless infidel, had to be fought out:—and so far he was content, for so far he had had the advantage.

"And you will write the notes this evening—without taking counsel of your husband?" said Mr. Lascelles.

She hesitated, and turned helplessly in her chair.

"I count on your fidelity to your promise and attention to my wishes. Remember what I have said. If Mr. Fullerton were to ask me to his house I would refuse to go. It is as your guest only that I consent to appear—only because this dinner is yours, not his. You understand, my child?" He spoke quietly but strongly. He wanted her to feel that he was in earnest.

"Yes—I will do as you tell me; I promise," said Hermione, yielding finally to the pressure put on her. "I will arrange it as you wish, dear Superior. Perhaps it will be better after all!"

"You are very sweet and good—you are the perfection of the kind of woman whom men most appreciate!" said Mr. Lascelles with more warmth of admiration than he had hitherto shown; and Hermione, blushing like a girl, felt half ashamed and half elated at the praise of this handsome man, her spiritual Director.

Soon after this, Virginia and Sister Agnes came into the room where the two were sitting, skirting so cleverly by dangerous places, like skaters shooting over thin ice. They came from the Sister's private oratory, where the girl had been making her simple "statement

of thoughts and feelings" which the Sister was careful not to call confession, and receiving advice which she was as careful not to call spiritual direction; but which advice included, among other things, a recommendation to be very sweet and even tender to Ringrove Hardisty whom it was essential to win over, and very sorrowful and reticent, and even cold, to that father who must be beaten with many stripes till the offending Adam was whipped out of him;—for the good of his immortal soul tortured in his humanity through his paternal love, that his spirit might be cleansed and redeemed. These confidences and directions from the Sister were in preparation for the graver confession to the vicar, which, with public confirmation, had to come when Virginia and Hermione should be judged strong enough in the faith to take an independent line without wavering—trusted to stand out publicly—the one against the father and the other against the husband. As yet —the wife, at least—was not to be wholly counted on.

Hermione rose as the Sister entered and went to meet her with a certain conscious confusion and rather excessive affectionateness. She had walked up from the church with Mr. Lascelles after weekly confession to him in the sacristy—the fourth now; and she was a

little fluttered, as is natural, when a woman has been saying in secret to one man what she would not repeat to all—when a wife has been receiving praises and assurances of friendship and sympathy which she would not care that her husband should know of—and when one whose life should be clear as crystal and informed by duty rather than sentiment, has been mingling religion and romance, secresy and spiritual philandering in one sweet dangerous cup together. These weekly confessionals were fast becoming the charm of Hermione's life:—Had Mr. Lascelles not been a priest, one might have said the probable ruin as well as the present charm. As it was, her fair face was flushed and her blue eyes were softer, darker, more humid than in general as she caressed the Sister in voice and manner with the instinctive hypocrisy of one who wishes to disarm suspicion and divert attention.

"Superior has been kind enough to promise to dine with us on Monday week," she said, holding the cold thin hand warmly clasped in hers.

Sister Agnes looked at her brother with a charming smile.

"He does not often go into the world," she said. "You ought to think yourselves specially honoured;"

—that silky smile on her face still fixed and unchanging.

"Yes," answered Hermione, having nothing else to say, but saying this prettily and looking at Mr. Lascelles with docile eyes; while Virginia, stealing her arm round the Sister, pressed her waist lovingly, proud and happy at the prospect of seeing, on a fixed day more than a week hence, this spiritual Zeus whom she knew that she should see every day in the interim, as had been the rule for some time past now. But, then, this spiritual Zeus was *her* brother; and Virginia was essentially in love with the Sister, and was happy, failing the substance, in the shadow.

The girl had to do penance for this little bit of effusiveness. Sister Agnes was a secret kind of person, and did not approve of "showing one's feelings," as she used to say. And she was an extremely cold woman as well, and easily bored by demonstrations of affection. She was sweet and caressing in manner—or rather in the tone of her voice, in the turn of her head, in her smile; but it was only manner. It went no farther than voice and smile, the bending of her small head and the curve of her long thin throat; and more was repulsive to her. So when next the Fullertons went

to the Vicarage to work for the Church, the Sister placed Virginia by Aunt Catherine in the window, and enjoined on her sympathy with that silly creature's spiritual experiences—which a profane person might have called senseless maunderings.

It was not a pleasant moment for Hermione when she had to tell her husband what she had done. In spite of all the dissatisfaction which had been growing steadily, if silently, for some years now—though she had diligently cherished a deep displeasure against him since his refusal to join in the Harvest Festival—and notwithstanding the influence which Mr. Lascelles was gaining over her and the strong fascination that he had for her—the habit of love for her husband was a powerful element in her life still, and she did not enjoy the thought of paining him. And she knew that this arrangement, meant as an affront to him as it was, would pain him. He would reason himself into tranquillity again after a time; but the first moments would be bitter, and she dreaded giving the wound. But it had to be done. She herself had feathered the arrow, and now she herself must plant it.

"Richard," she said, when they were alone in her dressing-room that evening after the maid had left her

dressed for dinner, while waiting there, as they always did, for the gong; "we ought to ask Sir Angus and Lady Maine to meet Mr. Lascelles. We ought to give a large dinner-party."

"I suppose we ought," he said with an involuntary sigh.

There was a wound deep down in his heart which the vicar's name chafed. He would not acknowledge to himself that the fight between them was being carried on in his own house, with his wife and daughter for the stakes. He insisted in his own mind that it was all impersonal and on purely intellectual grounds; and that if Hermione had become a little warped and Virginia somewhat too warmly won, it was only a passing phase with each—and that the wife would come back to her best self again soon, very soon, and would bring her daughter with her. Yet the wound was there all the same; and he was like one beginning to stir in an uneasy dream to a painful wakening—not wholly asleep nor fully aroused—only dimly conscious of distress now and of anguish to come.

Hermione flamed suddenly, as one whose sacred image is touched with a profane hand.

"Why do you sigh in that manner, Richard?" she

asked hastily. "You are not overburdened by society; least of all by that of Mr. Lascelles."

"It was nothing, my wife. Did I sigh? Perhaps I am tired," he answered patiently.

"We have not had the vicar once yet to dinner. You need not look at this invitation as such a tremendous infliction!" she said, returning to the charge as her best defence.

"No, no; do not mistake me, dear. I do not make it an infliction," he said. "Of course we have to ask him—of course—naturally; we could do nothing else. When shall it be?"

"Monday week," said Hermione with a plunge. How her heart beat!

"You forget, my dear; Monday is impossible," he answered. "Monday is my lecture night, and a *dies non* with me at all times. How came you to forget, sweetheart?"

"You must give up your lecture," she said with a false air of calm conviction.

He looked at her in frank astonishment.

"I could scarcely do that," he said quietly. "For ten years I have never once failed my men, and I should scarcely like to do so now for no better reason

than choosing this night, of all the nights in the week, for a dinner-party at home."

"If you have been so regular for all these years, you can afford to disappoint them for once," said Hermione, taking one view of the question.

"Or, put it that if I have accustomed them to rely on me so implicitly, I am not justified in failing them for a caprice," he answered back, taking the other.

"But the vicar has no other night. If he does not come then he cannot come at all," said Hermione, her colour rising.

"In that case it had better not be at all," said Richard coldly. "Ask the rest on some other evening, and let Mr. Lascelles come when he can. I am not disposed to give up my duties that I may conciliate his fancies."

"I think you might consider what is due to the clergyman of the parish," said Hermione stiffly.

"Dear wife, are we to open this unprofitable vein?" he answered very gravely but very gently. "As a clergyman Mr. Lascelles stands nowhere with me—you know that as well as I do! As a neighbour and a gentleman only is he recognized in this house."

"Pardon me, Richard—Virginia and I see him as

something else," said Hermione, flushing to the roots of her hair. "And I think that both as her mother and the mistress of the house I have some right to consideration—and some right to my own way too. I do not often ask for it."

"You have every right to your own way, my wife; and you have never been refused when you have asked for it," said Richard, speaking as he would have spoken any time these twenty years past, had such a discussion as this been possible before these sadly disturbed later days;—that is, speaking with the sense of masterhood—a masterhood that was his by right of mutual love and perfect sympathy, and no more to be questioned in its righteousness than that the sun should shine and the earth bring forth her fruits in return.

"You give me my own way when I ask it! You are generous, certainly; considering all things, very generous!" said Hermione with a sneer.

And then her heart smote her. She tried to laugh off her words as if they had been said in jest.

"I mean to be so," said Richard gently, keeping his eyes lowered.

"And now you must give me my own way in this," cried Hermione, passing from her odd ill-temper to the

caressing voice and ways which, in spite of everything, came to her more naturally than any other when speaking heart-open to her husband.

He looked at her smiling.

"How can I, wife?" he said. "I will not fail my men for such a ridiculous reason as this. Make your dinner-party on some other day which can include Mr. Lascelles and will not interfere with my arrangements."

"I cannot," she said. "Mr. Lascelles himself fixed Monday week, and I cannot change it now."

"So! it is already arranged?" he said with a sudden flush. "In this case there was no need to consult me. If you have acted of your own free will, wife, why go through the form of asking my consent?"

"I do not think I did ask your consent," said Hermione quickly, up in arms at the word. How sudden her transitions! how uncertain her mood nowadays!

"No? What was it then?" he asked, trying to smile.

"I think I only told you of the fact," she answered with dignity. "As the mistress of the house I surely have the right to ask my best friend to dinner without the formal consent of my husband. It is a thing which every other married woman does; and I tell you frankly,

Richard, I will not submit to your tyranny any longer!"

He did not answer. Indeed for the moment he could not.

"There can be no discussion between you and me, my wife, on your rights," he said, after a troubled pause. "If it pleases you to ask this man—whom you call your best friend, and who is instead your worst enemy; yours and mine and our child's—to ask him every day in the week, you have the right to do so; and if it pleases you to do this without consulting me you have also the right. Our life of harmony and oneness has not been tyranny on my side and enforced submission on yours, but so perfect a welding together that our two wills have been one, needing only one voice to express and one action to embody. And that voice and action have naturally been mine, because I am the stronger man while you are the weaker and less experienced woman. As soon as there comes to be a divided will—as now by some strange fatality there is—yours has all right; and you will find me the first to recognize it. But this arrangement is not your will—it is Mr. Lascelles'; and to this I do not feel disposed to submit."

"You must, Richard," said Hermione hastily.

"No, wife, I will not," he answered gravely, taking her hand in his. "You have your rights;—Exercise them. Ask Mr. Lascelles when and as often as you will; but I also have my duties—rights if you like to call them so—and I will not disappoint my men for the mere whim of one who is the confessed enemy of all that I hold most dear, as I am also the enemy of all that he represents and believes; one who," he added sorrowfully, "has been the occasion of the only serious dissensions which we have had together for the whole of our married lives."

"Then you ought not to hate the Church and religion so much as you do!" said Hermione with a sob, breaking away from the point. "It is your own fault for being such an awful infidel as you are! How can a clergyman be anything but your enemy, especially one so sincere as Mr. Lascelles? If he is true to his own faith, he must abhor yours!"

"Do not let us discuss this part of the question," said Richard quickly. "That would indeed be waste of time."

"Then give way for my sake," she pleaded.

"Do not ask me, dear love. It is not for your sake; I know that too well;—but to flatter a man whom I

dislike, on an occasion which, contemptible as it is, he has chosen as the test of his power. Come! dry those dear eyes. I do not like to see them full of these strange tears. We are not going to quarrel about Mr. Lascelles as we did about the church decoration," he said, with contempt and sorrow mingled. "He is scarcely worth that sacrifice! Let the thing stand as it is. Ask him for Monday—if indeed that is his only day—and have the other people on another day; or put off the whole affair till Mr. Lascelles can come on any day in the week but a Monday evening."

"I cannot," said Hermione, yielding to the sudden candour of helplessness. "The notes are written and sent; and if you disturb the arrangements now, you will put a public affront on me; and I think I scarcely deserve that at your hands, Richard!"

He turned away and walked to the window. It was a very little matter and intrinsically unimportant in the face of the greater tragedies of life; but it staggered him as if it had been a really grave and serious declaration—as if it had been physically the blow that it was morally.

She followed him shyly, but penitently, with her eyes. Now that it was done, she was sincerely sorry and

wished that she could have prevented it. Yet how could she help herself? It was dreadful to have to hurt him like this; for, after all, he was her husband, and she had once loved him so passionately—before he had grown so stupid and abstracted; but Superior, of course, must be obeyed now. He was her Director—her father in the Church—and she had no alternative; but she wished that he had not laid this thing on her to do! It was an awful test; how sorry she was! Poor Richard! and how sorry he was too!

She went up to him and put her arms round him as he stood by the window looking out on the dark evening sky, but not seeing what he looked at. He was conscious only of pain and bewilderment, and the feeling that he had to accept personal humiliation at the hands of the wife whom he so tenderly loved and so implicitly believed in.

"I am sorry if I have vexed you, Richard," she said sweetly, laying her curly head against his shoulder as she stood behind him with her arms round him. "Don't be vexed with me, husband darling! I could not refuse the vicar when he put it to me as he did. I did not like, too, to seem such a baby that I have not a word to say in my own house; but I did not like to do it all the same. I cannot bear to think that I have vexed you; have

I vexed you, Richard?"—all said in the sweetest, softest, most coaxing tone and manner, while her pretty pink fingers wandered up to his face, and her round white arms pressed him to her lovingly.

He turned round and took her to him.

"Not vexed me, sweet wife. Just a little surprised; a little wounded," he said gently, crushing down his bitterness of pain for the sweeter pleasure of forgiving one beloved. "Let it pass. The thing is done, and we will say no more about it."

"How good you are!" said his wife tenderly.

"Who could be anything else to you?" he answered back. "The vague cloud that has come between us sometimes of late is not of your making. I know that, sweet faithful heart! And are all these years of truth and love to be forgotten for a slight misunderstanding that will pass like the morning mist on the mountain tops? My Hermione! do I not know you!"

He kissed her and she clung to him girlishly.

"Oh Richard!" she said, her fair face raised to his: "if I could but make a Christian of you!"

He smiled.

"Never that, my life!—but always your best and truest friend—your defender from all sorrow and evil;

and, if you will let me be so, your guide to truth out of the dark regions of superstitious error."

Hermione shuddered visibly and drew away from her husband's breast. "The leader of souls to hell" sounded in her ears, and she seemed to feel the vicar's hands dragging her bodily away. That breast had once been her dearest home where she had been her best self and her happiest; now she was frightened and felt almost sinful in being there at all.

But habit is strong, and with a sudden revulsion of feeling she turned back to him passionately, and clung to him with a nervous, almost convulsive grasp, like one who had lost and now has found. Then they went downstairs, she still clinging to his hand—which once she furtively kissed when Jones was not looking that way.

They were so happy, so bright and cordial together at dinner, that Virginia was in a certain sense ashamed, and bewildered as well. She was full of her instructions from Sister Agnes to be very sweet and sorrowful but unmistakably cold to her father; to let him feel that she held him as a sinner with whom she was bound by her loyalty to a higher law not to associate familiarly, though all the while she loved him as his daughter who would—

should he repent and be absolved—return to her natural obedience when he entered into the way of grace. And she knew that her mother had been set on the same way by Superior. And now she had come in with papa, laughing and talking as they had not talked together for ages, as it seemed to her; and when she herself had become interpenetrated with the sorrowful strength of his partial excommunication! It was perplexing; but she had the sincerity of her youth and knew no disobedience to the law by which she had undertaken to live.

Her coldness however passed for some time unnoticed by Richard; save as temporary dulness of spirits, due as he supposed to temporary indisposition. When she smiled so faintly at his fond follies and did not answer when he looked for a playful response, as in the days of what was substantially now another life:—when she would not promise to take that long-talked-of early morning ride with him:—for how could she when she went unknown to him every morning to eight o'clock matins at the church? and telling falsehoods even in fun was not much in her way:—he was sorry for her evident depression and a little anxious, but he supposed nothing wrong.

Hermione however, who understood the play, was secretly greatly annoyed.

"Girls have no sense," she said to herself. "They never know when to relax;" meaning that if she herself had relented for a day, and had turned away from the new creed to the old love, Virginia, who had not gone through the same process of feeling, ought to be ready to do so too and was to blame because she did not.

"You can go with papa, Virginia," she said with a warning look. "If he wishes it, certainly."

"In the early morning, mamma?" asked Virginia anxiously.

"Certainly. It is not for every morning; it will not be too great a tax on your strength, or take too much time from your sleep," the mother answered with a forced laugh.

Virginia's pale face flushed for a moment and then became still paler than before. The secresy enjoined on her by Sister Agnes had always been a trial and had sometimes been broken through; but this deliberate deception set forth by her mother was a heavier cross still. Yet by the law of obedience she must let it pass.

"When the day dawns Ladybird will be ready, I dare say," said her father good-naturedly. "And if she really does not wish to go with me, do not force her."

"Of course she will go with you, Richard, if you wish it," said Hermione hastily. "Say yes, Virginia."

"If I may," said Virginia hesitating.

"May! who is to prevent you, Ladybird?" he laughed.

She looked down and did not answer.

"Why! come here to me," he cried, holding out his hand. "I have never seen my Ladybird like this before! What has come to her? Come here, my pet, and let me feel your hand. Are you well?"

She rose from her place and stood for a moment without moving. Dinner and dessert both were over now, and they were going into the drawing-room. Hermione had risen and was standing a little apart. Richard was still seated.

"Come, my darling," he said fondly, turning round in his chair.

She went up to him, her pale, pure face quivering, her eyes moist and sorrowful.

"My darling!" he said tenderly. "What is it, my little Virginia?"

'She sank back fainting in her father's arms.'

She put her arms round his neck and kissed his upturned face, her tears falling down like rain.

"Oh papa, papa!" she sobbed. "If you would but become a Christian and be reconciled to the Church!"

"My little girl," he said gravely; "am I not the best judge for myself?"

"No, papa, you are blinded and led astray by Satan," she said. "He stands between you and me, you and mamma, you and Our Lord. I can see him now—there—there on one side. He has hold of you, papa, and the Blessed Mother cannot reach you though she tries. Oh, it is dreadful! dreadful! Poor lost papa!"

For the first and only time in her life, hysterical emotion overcame Virginia, and with a sharp cry she sank back fainting in her father's arms.

"That cursed brood!" said Richard bitterly. "There is no tie too holy for them to break, no lie too degrading for them to teach, if it can sap a pure love and establish their vile rule. The first use to which I would put my God, if I had him, would be to sweep all priests off the face of the earth as wild beasts who are man's worst enemies!"

"How dreadful it all is!" cried Hermione with strange passion, as she rang violently for aid. But whether it was the influence of the Sister over Virginia, or her pitiful vision and fainting fit, or the command of Mr. Lascelles to herself, or Richard's blasphemous denunciation that was dreadful, she scarcely knew. For the moment she hated the whole thing, and wished for the old sleepy loving tranquil life where was neither secresy nor excitement, and where, if they were dull, they were at least at peace and free from these strange disturbances.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SNARE SET.

THAT strange fainting fit had no ill results so far as the health of Virginia was concerned; and, by somewhat frightening Hermione, it served to bring her and Richard for the time at least closer together than they had been of late; so that for the next ten days conjugal life at the Abbey ran on the smoothest casters to be found. Mr. Lascelles, holding that stone in his sleeve which he meant to fling with such a true aim at the dinner, forbore to interfere. This delusive brief St. Martin's summer did not trouble him, and would make the coming storm all the more effective by contrast. Wherefore, undisturbed by the subtle suggestions of her Director—suggestions which always cast so much trouble into her soul and so much sorrow into her life—made to feel at peace with herself and suffered to remain at peace with her husband, Hermione came back to her sweetest self, and was almost as happy as she had been in the first years of her married life.

Her very relations with Mr. Lascelles added to her happiness, because adding to the movement, the excitement, the interest, the affections of her days. Delicately flattered and spiritually caressed by him as she was —performing this little penance and that little task for him in pleasant obedience and constant remembrance—feeling him always as a warm and vital spiritual influence about her and living in a secret romance, not only negatively sinless but positively holy, and all the more delightful because it was secret—she had everything that she most desired; and, action and reaction operating according to their laws, her renewed tenderness for Richard was increased by her love for Mr. Lascelles, as her pleasure with the vicar added to her happiness with her husband. Thus, time flew fast on golden wings for the next ten days; and when the eventful evening came, the fair woman surpassed herself in beauty of person and sweetness of mood.

She had never looked so well, and had never been dressed with such a prodigality of wealth and luxury. Her dress was "moonlight" coloured satin—the palest shade of that blue which is as much green as blue and more grey than either—with a good deal of fine white lace and silver embroidery about it. She wore diamonds

in her hair and round her neck ; and their flash and play of light lifted up into life what else might have been delicacy refined into insipidity. She did not look more than twenty-five years of age, with her fair innocent face crowned by the curly golden hair among which the diamonds shone and sparkled ; her beautiful arms, with one diamond band on each ; her softly moulded figure that had bloomed into generosity without losing its grace, and of which the throat was as round and smooth, the shoulders as finely modelled and as exquisitely polished as when she was first Richard Fullerton's wife, and the acknowledged belle of the county ; and she looked as happy as she was beautiful—and felt what she looked. She was the very ideal of a lovely woman in her prime, possessing every quality which men most admire and every virtue which they most adore. But she had neither reasoning faculty nor self-reliance ; which was no subject of regret to Mr. Lascelles ; while Richard, who had dominated her by love, and had lived their joint life in his own way, had never yet found out that this sweet echo of his will was only an echo and not a response, and that any one else who chose to take the trouble could waken it as well as he had done—and it might be even better.

This past week of happiness with her husband, her veiled romance with Mr. Lascelles, her conscience at rest and her imagination at fever-heat—all had brightened and embellished her to a marvellous extent; so that people looked at her twice, to see what she had done to herself; and Lady Maine, a hard-featured, stalwart kind of woman, five feet ten inches high and portly in proportion, stared at her curiously; then turning to Miss Molyneux, said, in not too discreet a whisper:—

"How wonderfully young Mrs. Fullerton looks to be the mother of that great girl there! It is almost indelicate; they look more like sisters than mother and daughter. Does she paint or dye? or what is it? It is quite unnatural!"

To which Aunt Catherine answered mysteriously: "It is the saints. Ever since she came over she has been like this. The saints do it for her at night. She looks as if she were fed on heavenly cream and roses; and so she is."

For her reward Miss Molyneux was set down in the great creature's mind as certainly insane; and with a smothered kind of groan, which the irreverent would have called a grunt, Lady Maine moved away.

She was afraid of mad people, she said when relating the occurrence to her friends; and, being a Protestant of the Protestants, would as soon have believed in the gods of Greece as in the saints of Christendom, and indeed thought reliance on the one no more idolatrous than faith in the other.

For the rest, Virginia, in her favourite white, with one row of pearls round her slender throat, and even more ethereal in appearance than usual, was the fair, sweet, natural nun, standing there as a spectator rather than an actor—looking on at the gay world, but not in it nor of it. She was not sad nor sorrowful, not pinched nor meagre, and still less censorious than either; she was simply out of place in what is called "society," and out of harmony with her present state of luxury. She was like some pure spirit lost out of its natural sphere, wandering for a while through the grosser world of men, waiting for the time when she might return home to the heaven she had left.

Aunt Catherine, still doing penance for her presumption in thinking that she, a wretched little potsherd, had been chosen as a vessel of grace for the reception of the divine essence, was in a black dress of sober cut, in imitation of the Sister's style. Hitherto she had been

noted for the multitudinous flounces and furbelows with which she had hooped herself round, and for the miniature market-garden that she had been accustomed to pile on the top of her odd little bullet-shaped head. And as she was short and very stout, with a round, rosy face, and hairs so thinly planted as to show great shining tracts of scalp beneath, her ornate fashions had always been made occasion of much sarcasm and quizzing from her friends. But to-night she was just as conspicuous in another way. She had on a black alpaca gown that was like a riding habit, scanty, perfectly plain, and showing the lines of her rotund figure as distinctly as her flounces and furbelows had exaggerated them; while, scorning ornament or disguise, she had braided her poor little wisps of hair plainly on each side of her head, and tied them up into a knot behind which a small coffee-cup would have covered.

Theresa, looking thin and feverish, was also in black, but of lighter material and more graceful form. She had placed a few white chrysanthemums about her, and looked as if in half-mourning. Sombre tones suited the state of her own feeling which was too intense not to be tragic; and the scentless white flowers were associated in her mind with the church decorations

on the day that had given her the fever which she mistook for ecstasy, the spiritual assurance which with her meant human love.

Pretty Beatrice in cream-colour—warmer than Virginia's dead white—had gold sequins round her head and neck. Her soft, clinging drapery, and the gold of the coins which gave life to the tender tone of that drapery, suited the sleepy oriental style of beauty which she had come by, no one knew how. But as nature never lies, there must have been some eastern graft somewhere in the family tree, for the large dark heavy-lidded eyes, the reddish-gold crisp and curly hair—every hair of which was as if alive and separate, making a misty cloud about her when she let it fall—the richly coloured carmine of cheek and lip set against the soft peach-like groundwork of her skin, the very hands and feet and unconscious grace of her indolent pose—all was eastern, without the possibility of denial; so was her placid temper, gentle, sympathetic, plastic, but traversed by a vein of potential passion which circumstances might call forth but which was as yet dormant.

Lady Maine had clothed her voluminous person in a much-befrilled dress of hard deep red; and Mrs.

Nesbitt, with her gentle face and matronly figure, was in grey covered down by black lace.

They made a pretty combination of colour and effect as they stood or sat about the room; and though a holy man and an avowed celibate, Mr. Lascelles complimented most of them personally, and expressed his approbation of their appearance. By the way, he seemed to consider himself in some sort the master of the feast, and more than once, ignoring Richard as if he had not been in existence, went forward to greet the entering guests, whom he then took to Hermione. But how could any one resent the actions of a man with such a graceful bearing, such heroic self-possession, and such sublime unconsciousness of the possibility of giving offence as characterized the vicar of Crossholme?

Going up to Hermione, he said that she was like a dream—"one of a dream of fair women, such as poets imagine and painters portray." Then, seeing her flush—she did not like to be one of many—he added in a whisper which no one but herself could hear: "But always the one to me in Crossholme or indeed all the world over—the fairest jewel in the crown of the Church, and the dearest to me personally."

"Thank you," said Hermione, with a rapid glance

to where Richard was standing on the hearthrug, leaning against the chimney-piece, one foot on the fender and his head resting on his hand, while he talked local politics with Mr. Nesbitt and thought the whole thing an unmitigated nuisance.

Of Theresa, whose thin hot hand he held longer and pressed more warmly than was at all necessary for friendly greeting or even clerical patronage, the vicar asked :—

"What have you done to make yourself so beautiful to-night, my dear child? Pomps and vanities—eh? This black gown and those white flowers become you wonderfully; and if they are pomps and vanities, they are simpler than most, and we must not be too hard on the young."

"If you are pleased, Superior—" answered Theresa, looking up into his face. Her eyes completed the sentence.

"Yes, I am pleased," he answered royally; "more than pleased"—lowering his voice: "and with your whole personality, my child, as well as with your dress. I shall see you at mattins to-morrow, of course? I have to speak to you afterwards."

By which the girl's cup of happiness was filled to

the brim and her very soul flooded with dangerous joy.

Even Beatrice was not left out in the vicar's tour of inspection and commendation, for all that she did not belong to the inner fold. He longed to count her among his flock of tender and obedient lambs, but he could not find the Archimedean point, nor how she could be moved from her present place. There was a baffling something that eluded his hand, try to hold her as he might. He could not say what that something was, he only knew that it existed. She was neither unimpressionable nor stupid—quite the contrary; and she was both docile and sincerely affectionate. All the same she was impenetrable to his thrusts, and not to be moved from her quiet placidity, against which he raged as indifferentism and substantial heathenism. To-night he changed his tactics, thinking he would try what flattery would do.

"You are positively superb, Miss Nesbitt," he said, as he came to her in her turn, while making his tour of inspection and approbation round the room. He spoke in a tone of enthusiastic admiration, as if carried out of himself; and yet those who knew him detected that well-known accent of satire which was the drop of

vinegar in the honey. "You are the realization of Rebecca, in 'Ivanhoe;' or, better still, the type of some splendid young Heathen whose conversion will one day be the glory of her confessor:—of me?" he added, smiling with paternal benignity on the pretty dark-eyed creature.

Beatrice opened wide her sleepy long-fringed eyes, and with her eyes partly unclosed her handsome pleasure-loving mouth. She put on this look always when she was startled, or wished to show the "mild surprise and gentle indignation" which was her loudest expression of dissatisfaction.

"But I am neither a Jewess nor a Heathen," she said.

"And have no need of conversion?" he asked.

"No; how can I when I am a Christian?" asked Beatrice.

"And if I tell you that you, as we all, have this need because of sin?" he returned.

She shook her pretty richly coloured head, and the coins on her hair shook and jingled.

"I do not think I should quite believe you," she said with perfect inoffensiveness.

"So young and so strong in your conceit?" he

asked with a smile, wishing her to feel herself reproved, but tenderly as well as faithfully.

"I do not think it is being conceited not to feel a Jewess or a Heathen when I am English and a Christian," said Beatrice simply. "And, as for the confession you spoke of, I certainly should never do that. Fancy confessing—just like a Roman Catholic! How dreadful! Besides, I have nothing to confess; and it is not English, nor proper."

"Bee, dear, do not say that! We all have much to confess and much to be forgiven," said Virginia in a low voice; while Ringrove, who was sitting near and had heard what had been said, took up the parable hurriedly.

"The best confessor for a girl is her mother—for a woman, her husband," he said in a voice that was unmistakably harder and less cheery than his in general. "Any one else is worse than a mistake."

"Ah! but you are unconverted too—as yet—and speak according to the spirit that is within you," said Mr. Lascelles with a courtly but still paternal kind of air, smiling at the young man pleasantly and yet with some kind of friendly pity, as he moved away to speak to Sir Angus Maine. The General was as uncompro-

mising a Protestant as his superior officer, my lady; and the vicar wanted to feel his ground, and see if he could not neutralize by personal influence the sectarian opposition of which he felt only too sure. But there was not much time for endeavour of any kind; for the dinner—which had been only awaiting the arrival of the inevitable laggards; this time two young officers from Starton—was announced in due form, and Richard, giving his arm to Lady Maine, led the way to the dining-room, the vicar, doing his best to fascinate Mrs. Nesbitt, following immediately after.

At the dinner-table the first hitch of the evening began. There were to be many before it should be ended; hitches all carefully prepared by Mr. Lascelles, who had laid his plans with the skill of a veteran used to the game and not nice as to the methods of success. He had undertaken, in his own mind, to cover Mr. Fullerton with confusion; to make him eat dirt before the strangers assembled at his table, to whom his objectionable opinions were as yet unknown; to convict him out of his own mouth of infidelity and consequently of immorality; and to hold him up before the world as a man to be shunned and despised, because he disbelieved in the Divine origin of the Bible, and was not prepared

to assert positively, as of a thing which he knew and could prove, that man has an individual existence after death. All this had to be done before the last glass of claret had been drunk—and the first shot was fired at once.

Following the example of their graceless host, all the guests sat down, save Mr. Lascelles and the Molyneux family. These stood—the ladies with bended heads and hands reverently clasped; Cuthbert in the exact attitude of an old monk in a certain illuminated missal which he had bought, and which it had taken his fancy to imitate; and Mr. Lascelles with his head held straight, his hands joined close together by the palms and fingers, but not interlaced. With a look of gentle reproof at Hermione who had seated herself in all innocence, he began an intoned grace in a loud official voice. It took every one but the Molyneux family by surprise; for even the Maines, used to the ceremony, were startled by the method. The servants stopped midway between the sideboard and the table; the ladies left off unbuttoning their gloves; the gentlemen ceased to unfold their dinner napkins; some rose confusedly and made a clatter as they did so; others kept their places, also confusedly, and bent their heads as if devoutly

studying the monogram on their plates. Virginia, who, grace before meat being a novelty, had seated herself with the rest, rose with a precise imitation of Sister Agnes in the automatic movement of her body and the mediæval action of her hands. Hermione faltered between the two demonstrations, not wholly rising because of her husband nor frankly seated because of Mr. Lascelles; while Richard kept his place and did his best to look philosophically indifferent to what he considered superstition for the one part and impertinence for the other. But inwardly he chafed, not so much at the thing perhaps, as at the intention.

It was the first time that grace had ever been said at his table. Mr. Aston, who cared neither for benediction nor thanksgiving in comparison with the meats and the wines that came in between, had never troubled himself with a function which he knew would be unwelcome. If he chose to dine at the table of an infidel, he must take the consequences, he used to say to himself:—and Mr. Fullerton was master of his own house, and must be allowed to arrange his life as he thought best. But Mr. Lascelles was a different kind of man. What he held to be his duty that he would do,

in season or out of season, no matter what the obstacles nor who the opposers. Those who did so oppose him were in fault, not he who insisted; they were accursed, but he was faithful. Wherefore he startled every one with his High Church grace to-day, and flung the first challenge into the face of his host.

Then Cuthbert Molyneux intoned the Amen; the spell was removed; they all sat down or raised themselves up according to their attitudes; and the clatter of preliminary serving began.

"I trust you are not displeased at my giving the benediction unasked?" said Mr. Lascelles, in a loud voice across the table to Richard, when the soup brought a comparative lull.

Conversation between the two was easy, as each sat facing the other, the length of the table having been made the honourable place; so that Richard sat between Lady Maine and Aunt Catherine, while Hermione opposite was between Sir Angus and Mr. Lascelles. It had been "Superior's" wish to have the table so arranged; and Hermione had of course obeyed.

"It was official," said Richard quietly.

"Thanks for your patience; but I fancy that it is

not usual to say grace at your table?" persisted Mr. Lascelles with well-feigned embarrassment.

"No," said Richard; "it is not."

"Not say grace!" cried Lady Maine, with an air of personal offence. Orthodoxy and loyalty were with her personal matters, and she held herself justified in her wrath when she heard either assailed. "You don't say grace before meat, Mr. Fullerton?" she continued. "How very terrible!"

"Different people have different habits," he answered.

"But this is not a habit, like folding up your napkin or washing your hands—it is a duty," cried Lady Maine authoritatively. "I should expect my dinner to choke me if I did not say grace before it!"

He smiled.

"Mine does not; and I have an excellent digestion," he answered simply; then spoke suddenly of the weather, and how well the harvest had been got in, and the predictions made by the meteorologists of the coming winter.

By which Lady Maine was not a little annoyed. She was fond of laying down the law on things spiritual, and believed that she had got hold of the whole truth—that great, shifting, many-sided Truth, she held it all

in the compass of one or two dogmatic sentences! But not to lose an occasion—and she found one everywhere—she cut Richard short a little abruptly, by saying, still in her authoritative commanding way:—

"It is very wicked to talk in that way, Mr. Fullerton. The Bible says 'the wind bloweth where it listeth,' and it is simple infidelity to try and find out things which the Almighty has mercifully hidden from us."

"I am afraid, Lady Maine, this argument would scarcely suit the present times nor advance the best interests of man," said Richard with a slight smile. "All that we know we have found out for ourselves, and you would scarcely have us go back to primitive ignorance; nor can we stop where we are."

"There are limits, Mr. Fullerton—limits," she answered. "What we have to do is to believe in the Word and perform our religious duties."

"But, Lady Maine, Mr. Fullerton does not believe in religious duties," said Mr. Lascelles across the table.

"Mr. Fullerton must believe in religious duty!" said Lady Maine decidedly. "You are not mad, I suppose?" she asked, turning abruptly to Richard.

"Not that I know of," he answered good-humouredly; "but my convictions are scarcely to the purpose at this moment. I will confess to you at some other time, Lady Maine."

"Ah! you see that is just the difference between us and you—the true and the false," returned Mr. Lascelles with odd persistency. "We are never ashamed to confess the faith we hold."

"So far to your honour," said Richard courteously but coldly; and then broke resolutely away into the subject of the present Afghan war, on which Lady Maine held herself an authority, having been a baby in arms at Calcutta during the time of the last. The condition of India was a subject in which she took great delight; and here too she never wearied of laying down the law. By which diversion full a quarter of an hour was lost before Mr. Lascelles found another opening.

Society was just then much interested in a certain case of wife-murder. The woman had led a loose kind of life; the man was a hard-working, decent fellow who had borne patiently with her shameful habits, and had always hoped for better things. One day, exasperated beyond himself by her unfaithfulness as a

wife and her drunken desertion of her duty as a mother, he had beaten her savagely; and finally struck the fatal blow. It had been brought in murder and he had been condemned to death; but the Society for the Abolition of Capital Punishment had taken up the case and was making strenuous efforts for a reprieve. Richard, who, like some others, thought that the worst use to which you can put a man is to hang him and that "extenuating circumstances" may sometimes be brought to bear in mitigation of the crude award as by law established, had signed the petition for commutation of the sentence, and had got "his men" to sign it too.

Mr. Lascelles had refused.

A pause in the general hum, and Lady Maine's ultimatum on the Afghan policy, gave the vicar the opening for which he had been waiting.

"I see you signed the petition for that man Westerton's reprieve—the murderer," he said across the table in a loud voice and one which commanded general attention.

"Yes, I did," said Richard.

"Will you get him off?"

"It seems likely. I hope so," he answered.

"And I hope not," said Mr. Lascelles. "The man was a murderer, and the law should take its course."

"His provocation was great. He was more to be pitied than condemned," returned Richard mildly.

"'Whoso sheddeth man's blood by man shall his blood be shed,'" said Mr. Lascelles solemnly. "You cannot get over that, Mr. Fullerton."

"That is an argument which does not enter into the discussion," said Richard.

"The direct command of God is an argument that cannot be thrust out of any discussion," said Mr. Lascelles speaking loudly, his voice dominating the table. "It underlies all law and all duty."

"In which case we may as well pass on to another subject," returned Richard with perfect temper.

"Ah! pardon! I forgot!" said Mr. Lascelles, passing his hand over his face. "I remember now—you deny the Bible and its Divine authority. You see, it is so rare to meet with a man who rejects God's Holy Word, that I was off the track. As you say, it makes discussion difficult:—for if you take the Bible from us, what is left?—no solid foothold in law or morals anywhere!"

"You deny the Bible, Mr. Fullerton?" cried Lady

Maine. New to the place as she and Sir Angus were they had not learnt the social byways. "You deny the Bible?" she repeated; "and are not afraid that you will be struck dead like Ananias and Sapphira?"

"Well, no; you see I have lived on till now," answered Richard drily.

"As a proof of God's infinite mercy—giving you time to repent!" she said. "And may I ask what on earth do you believe, if you do not believe the Scriptures?"

"My faith cannot interest you, Lady Maine," he said gently. "Let us change the subject."

"Your faith, Mr. Fullerton!—your want of faith you mean!" said Aunt Catherine with one of those odd gleams of quickness sometimes flashing from fools. "And want of faith interests all good Christians who would like to see the blessed saints allowed to work for the salvation of a lost soul."

"It is very kind of you to say so, Miss Molyneux, but I cannot see it in that light," answered Richard pleasantly. "And, at all events, it does not interest myself at this moment," speaking lightly.

"I think want of belief in the Bible the greatest sin in the world, except Popery," said Lady Maine stiffly.

She was displeased, and more than displeased, with

all round; resenting the patent papistry of the vicar and this silly little woman, who talked of the saints as if they were personal friends, as much as she was horrified at the confessed infidelity of her host; and sorely troubled how to bear testimony which should be at once a defence of religion and an attack on ritualism.

"Ah, but, Lady Maine, the new school to which Mr. Fullerton, unfortunately for mankind, has dedicated his splendid talents, makes it a principle not to recognize faith in anything," said the vicar. "It believes only in what it can weigh and measure—in what it can demonstrate by mathematical symbols and record in a series of experiments. Mystery exists nowhere for it—only temporary ignorance of phenomena; and faith, like sin, like inspiration and forgiveness, is exploded. It has put creation in the place of the Creator: for Deity it has substituted force, and for the Divine ordering by a loving will, dead mechanical laws. It does not believe even the historical miracles of Scripture—does it, Mr. Fullerton?"

"The rationalistic school, if that is what you mean, certainly does not believe in results without material causes," said Richard quietly. "And you are quite correct—it does believe in law."

"The miracle of Jonah is, I fancy, a typical stumbling-block to you all?" the vicar asked blandly.

"No whale could have swallowed a man," answered Richard; "not to speak of a man living three days and nights in a whale's body if he could have been taken into it."

"Not by God's power?"

"Not according to the limitation of a whale's anatomy and the necessities of a man's."

"And I believe it firmly," said Lady Maine emphatically. "For the Bible says, 'And God sent a great fish.'"

"Yes, we may rest assured all the miracles recorded were wrought," said Mr. Lascelles, addressing Lady Maine. "The speaking of Balaam's ass among them."

"Perhaps that is the least incredible of the series," said Richard drily.

"And the consuming by fire of the false priests of Baal!—that too we may believe," said the vicar with a cruel gleam in his sharp grey eyes.

"Yes; you priests of the dominant faith have always been ready with fire and slaughter when you were afraid of rivals," said Richard. "But this *aspic* is more to

the purpose than theology at this moment. Will you not take some, Lady Maine?"

"Thank you, none," she answered disagreeably.

If she still continued to eat this infidel's food it should not be by his direct invitation, only under the compulsion of circumstances.

Mr. Lascelles did not intend to be put down.

"You cannot set bounds to the working of Omnipotence," he continued. "Where would you limit Almighty power, Mr. Fullerton?"

"Where you begin it," said Richard, looking him calmly in the face. "But this discussion strikes me as singularly out of place here, Mr. Lascelles. At any other time I will meet you as publicly as you will; but we have had enough of it now."

The loophole had been made.

"That we meet on the opposite grounds of faith and reason?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes, on these grounds."

"Which means Christianity or Atheism?"

"Make your own formula."

"It must be yours also," said the vicar, still speaking eagerly. "And therefore we must define our terms like our programme. I repeat, it is Christianity or Atheism."

"Christianity or Agnosticism," said Richard.

"Which is the same thing," said Mr. Lascelles. "At all events, let us understand this clearly:—I challenge you, Mr. Fullerton, to a public disputation. On my side I affirm a personal God, the inspiration of the Bible and the truth of revealed religion; the separate and distinct acts of creation; the miracle of the Sacrifice and the Atonement; an immortal soul, to be judged at the Last Day according to the deeds done in the body; and a future life of bliss or woe. And you deny all this—is it not so?"

Mr. Lascelles spoke with a slow and measured utterance, his voice vibrating to the farthest corner of the room. All present had sunk into silence, and each held his breath, looking to their host, some with horror and some with pity.

He lifted his mild, fine, thoughtful face, looking straight into the eyes of his inquisitor.

"You have called on me for a confession of faith in a strange and somewhat unwarrantable manner," he said. "But I accept the challenge. I deny all these articles as set forth by you, but one—and that I neither deny nor affirm. It belongs to the domain of the Unknowable; and neither you nor I know what comes after

the death of the body—if anything, or nothing but the disintegration of the forces which made what we call life. Scientific analogy is against you—universal belief is with you; but in this, as in many other things, the confession of ignorance is the greater wisdom and the truer modesty."

A shudder ran round the table. Lady Maine wondered why the earth did not open and swallow up this miserable sinner, this worse than Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Sir Angus thought both the fellows mad alike, and longed to have the trying of them at drumhead court-martial; he would soon make short work of them! Hermione sat paralyzed. It was as if her life had crumbled to pieces at her feet and she had lost for ever the husband of her youth and the man of her love; while Virginia, the tears falling silently down her pallid face, called in her heart on the Divine Mother of God to convert her father suddenly—effectually—as St. Paul was converted; to break down for ever the evil pride of intellect by which he had fallen into such fearful sin, and bring him as a little child to the gates of heaven and into the fold of the Church.

Mr. Lascelles smiled triumphantly as he looked round the table and saw the effect that had been produced.

He had shot his bolt, and it had hit the mark. Richard Fullerton was henceforth irretrievably damaged in the neighbourhood. For it is one thing to have it known that you hold "odd opinions," and another to deny the immortality of the soul and the inspiration of the Bible over a dinner-table; as he would find out before long.

"We will settle a convenient time and place afterwards," he said airily, feeling like a general who has prepared an ambush into which the foe has boldly marched.

"No time or place ought to be convenient for such a wicked discussion as this!" said Lady Maine. "The police ought to prevent it! It makes my blood run cold to think of such blasphemy as possible in our own happy land, where we have the light of the Gospel for our guidance!"

"We who value our privileges must pray for those who disdain them. The long-suffering of God knows no limit," said Mr. Lascelles nobly.

But Lady Maine seemed to think that it had come to its limit now, and that it was almost as wicked to hope for mercy for Richard Fullerton as for the ultimate restoration of Satan himself.

"Perhaps you will add a prayer to prove Galileo in error, geological records so many stone fables, the

spectroscope a thaumaturge, and mathematics and the rest of the positive sciences mere moonshine. That would be more to the purpose than the conversion of my poor little insignificant soul," said Richard quite quietly.

To which Mr. Lascelles answered: "The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God, and your mole-like gropings in what you choose to call science leave the Rock of Ages untouched."

The dinner after this was flat and constrained. No one had liked the discussion which Mr. Lascelles had forced, and all but his own immediate adherents had felt it to be cruel and ill-bred. But even of those who were most annoyed with him, none went thoroughly with Richard; and though some honoured him for his fidelity, yet even they wished that he had not testified. Mr. Nesbitt, with whom religion meant going to church once on Sundays, eating plum-pudding at Christmas-time and pancakes on Shrove Tuesday, being baptized, married, and buried according to the rules of the national Church, said it was untoward and embarrassing; and condemned Mr. Lascelles roundly, if he did not quite exonerate Fullerton for his want of skill in fence. No man should force *his* hand, he said in an audible whisper to Rin-

grove from whom he was separated by Virginia; but the younger man not only exonerated but praised Mr. Fullerton, and answered back that he considered Mr. Lascelles' conduct simply infamous. Every one knew Mr. Fullerton's opinions, and it was the most scoundrelly thing he had ever known to force him in this way at his own table! If he had not been a clergyman, he, Ringrove, would have taken it up and have made him retract and apologize. He did not know what pain he was causing poor Virginia, nor how terrible it was to her to hear her father and Superior discussed and judged —her heart going with the one and her conscience with the other—and she unable to bridge over the gulf between them.

One of the young officers from Starton, to whom pretty Bee Nesbitt had been assigned, said to her quite aloud: "What a jolly queer conversation that has been for a dinner-table!—quite too funny altogether. Mr. Lascelles seems to be a tight fit, so far as I can judge; but Mr. Fullerton is plucky to the backbone. But I say," he continued confidentially, "what on earth does he mean by Agnosticism?"

"I don't know," said Bee, opening her big eyes.

Agnosticism, which she had so unconsciously ex-

plained, might be something to eat, if not to be afraid of in a narrow lane on a dark night. At all events, a right interpretation of what they had heard was as much beyond her not very extended mental range as it was beyond the young man's; and the two dark intelligences could not strike out a spark between them.

Lady Maine and Sir Angus blamed both Mr. Lascelles and Mr. Fullerton with impartial severity, and always spoke of this dinner as "their dreadful experience when they were between a Jesuit and an Infidel—a Papist and an Atheist;" and that nothing but their consideration for that poor little woman—"a deuced pretty creature," Sir Angus used to put in by way of parenthesis—kept them in their places; while Lady Maine invariably added:—

"I expected every moment to see the floor give way and swallow up that wretched creature before my eyes. And I was sitting next him too! I was never so frightened in my life. It was quite too dreadful altogether."

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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